

Winter's Wisdom

Advent 2024



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Of all the liturgical seasons, Advent is my favorite. It is a time of deep stillness and expectant waiting. It is a time of prophetic promise. On Tuesday of the first week in Advent, Isaiah tells us the wolf will be the guest of the lamb, the lion and calf browse together, and a descendent of Jesse — in Christian faith, Jesus — will judge the poor with justice. Filled with the spirit of wisdom, he leads the people in “knowledge of the Lord” so there “shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:1-10).

I love this quintessentially Advent text because it is painfully obvious that harm and ruin are running rampant in our world today. I suspect I am not alone in getting mad when things aren't the way they should be, whether in the macro world we all inhabit, or in each of our micro worlds. It is perhaps easier to feel discouraged and hopeless than to accept that life comes with both suffering and joy, with both beauty and ugliness. Advent calls us to a deeper faith in Jesus' power to reconcile these lion-lamb opposites.

A quote from bestselling author Mark Nepo's *Surviving Storms* seems especially apropos:

The great challenge of our time is how to let in both the beauty and devastation that meet us every day without wasting our life energy running from one to the other. The real work is opening our heart wide enough and deep enough to receive both, so that we can draw strength from the miracle of life to repair the tragedy of life.

But is it even possible to let in both beauty and devastation? I know I could not open my heart wide and deep enough to receive these wrenching realities were it not for the Christ-love already at work within. So often, the storms of our lives are also agents of transformation.

Sometimes the most necessary thing is to accept what is and then focus on what must be done.

I pray the daily reflections in this small booklet will lead you to an ever-deepening Advent faith in Jesus' power to reconcile the lion-lamb opposites of our lives.

Chris Schenk, CSJ
Cleveland, OH

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT - DECEMBER 1

SCRIPTURE

Jer 33: 14-16
Ps 25: 4-5, 8-9, 10, 14
1 Thes 3:12- 4:2
Lk 21: 25-28, 35-36

REFLECTION

*“The days are coming, says our God, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah.
In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot;
he shall do what is right and just in the land.
In those days Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure...”*
Jer 33: 14-16a

Our God says: “The days are coming... I will fulfill my promise...”

Advent reminds us of promises made – and promises kept. The promises made – and kept – are fulfilled in Jesus, God’s own son and our brother, who shares in God’s divinity and our humanity.

In Advent, we celebrate three comings of Jesus the Christ: in *history*, in the *mystery* of his abiding presence, and in *majesty* at the end of time.

We remember his coming in *history* – the beloved story of that first Christmas when Jesus came to live with us, teaching us how to live as children of God, and showing God what it is to be human. We look forward with hope – and some apprehension – to Christ’s return in *majesty* at the end of time. As we celebrate this Advent season in a world troubled with the darkness of war and violence, perhaps what we most need to remember and celebrate is the *mystery* of Christ’s abiding presence.

PRAYER

And so, as we walk through this world, we pray in hope and confidence: **Christ is with us!**

Wars rage in Ukraine and in Gaza: **Christ is with us!**

Thousands of refugees huddle at our borders seeking a new life:
Christ is with us!

Mass shootings in our schools create a climate of fear:
Christ is with us!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will live in hope, confident of the abiding presence
of Christ, our Savior.

*Jeanne Cmolik, CSJ
Cleveland, OH*

MONDAY - DECEMBER 2

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Ps 122: 1-9

Mt 8: 5-11

REFLECTION

Centurion: "Lord, my servant is suffering."

Jesus: "I will come and cure him."

Mt 5: 6-7

The day before I prayed with this Scripture, I facilitated a coaching session with a client. Synchronistically, that session enlightened this Gospel story for me in a new way. The client was struggling with a big change she wanted to request of her boss, a senior leader in her organization. But she was hesitant, understandably. She didn't want to appear disrespectful, and she felt afraid to approach this authority figure. During our coaching, my client's face lit up as she exclaimed: "I'LL JUST ASK! JUST ASK!" Since the senior leader had authority and status, my client decided to approach her with respect and humility, like the centurion who approached Jesus. My client also trusted the senior leader and hoped she would deliver for her, like Jesus did for the centurion. Thankfully, the senior leader said: "Yes, I will do that." The process and outcome were a success!

PRAYER

God of this Advent season, help me to see a particular need as well as a person with power to ameliorate the situation.

I pray that I can "JUST ASK" and that s/he will respond with "Yes, I will do that," as Jesus did.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

During Advent I'll identify someone in my family, parish, community or work life who might help resolve an issue or support a "dear neighbor" in need.

*Mary Jo Hazard, CSJ Associate
Naperville, IL*

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 3

SCRIPTURE

Is 11:1-10

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Lk 10:21-24

REFLECTION

*“Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse;
from Jesse’s roots, a branch will blossom.*

*“. . . the Root of Jesse will serve as a symbol to the peoples of the world –
nations will flock to you. . .”*

Is 11:1, 20

Today we heed our call, our call to be the “shoot of Jesse” and the symbol in the world today for justice, unity, and love. The readings give us the values we are to use to be this symbol – wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, reverence. Adopting these values allows us to serve the poor and oppressed in all of life in the spirit of St. Joseph and as St. Francis Xavier (whose memorial we celebrate today) through humility, gentleness, peace, and joy. Using the image of the stump of Jesse we can imagine ourselves as being in communion with all who have gone before us and all who will come after us working for justice and unity in our world. There are many present-day saints who model this for us. You recognize who they are because as you are in their presence you feel the energy of LOVE, the presence of God. The readings today call us to our vocation and call us to be the congregation of God’s Great Love.

PRAYER

God of Great Love,

Show me how to be the symbol of justice, unity, and love.
Allow me to feel the presence of the present-day saints as I
consciously adopt the values of St. Joseph to bring justice
to all life in our world today.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

As you go through your day today,
recognize how you feel the energy of LOVE
in all with whom you have contact: with people,
with nature, and with yourself.

*Kate Theriot, CSJ Associate
Houma, LA*

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 4

SCRIPTURE

Is. 25: 6-10a

Ps. 23: 1-6

Mt. 15: 20-37

REFLECTION

"I will give you good wine and rich food and wipe away your tears

What you want, you will get."

Is 7:8; Mt 15:25

Advent doesn't seem like a very long season this year in contrast to the year 2024 which seems, for many reasons, like it will never end. We experienced these very dark moments as global citizens: war and death in the Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Lebanon; COVID, COVID, COVID; a U.S. Presidential election and its aftermath, migrant abuse, and our own personal challenges – we could go on and on. And so, what does this very short Advent present as an opportunity? Perhaps it is to take that which is past and realize that it is past ... Advent once again reminds us that our Creator God gives us "good wine and rich food and wipes away our tears" and that Jesus, our companion, assures us "what good you want, you will get." We are invited during these Advent days to take the past, acknowledge that it is over, and to prepare, with all the hope and gumption that we have, for the renewed coming of the Prince of Peace into our personal and global lives.

PRAYER

O God, wipe away the tears from all faces and give all my neighbors in the whole world peace and hope.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Live knowing that the past is over, and the gift of Advent is the coming of new life and happiness.

*Carol Crepeau, CSJ
Burr Ridge, IL*

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 5

SCRIPTURE

Is 26: 1-6

Ps 118: 1 and 8-9, 19-21, 25-27a

Mt 7:21, 24-27

REFLECTION

“Open to me the gates of justice; I will enter them and give thanks.”

Ps 118: 19

There is a theme of open paths in today’s readings. There are songs to open the gates of justice, and Jesus teaching the disciples the commitment required to enter the kingdom. While they are beautiful words, I have always struggled with these images. I have wondered, would God really close an entrance to us? I have tried to reconcile the unifying and mysterious love of God with the actual gate-keeping that seems to be going on here. As I prayed, however, I felt a shift of perspective. I realized that the gate that is written about is not at the entrance to the kingdom, but the gate of our own hearts. It is not God who is gatekeeping, but we, ourselves, when we close our hearts to greater love and justice. The beautiful thing is that we are not on our own to open the gate to our hearts. Christ teaches us the way, if we are open enough to listen.

PRAYER

Inviting God, give us the grace to open wide the gates of our hearts to your creation.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Take a moment to reflect with God about
the gate of your own heart.

What is God’s invitation to you?

*Sarah Simmons, CSJ
La Grange, IL*

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 6

SCRIPTURE

Is 29: 17-24

Ps 27: 1, 4, 13-14

Mt 9: 27-31

REFLECTION

“after a life of shadow and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see”

Is. 29: 18 and 19

“Wait for God – stand tall and let your heart take courage.” Ps 27: 14

“Because of your faith, it will be done.” Mt. 9:29

As I watch and read the news daily (sometimes not, because I cannot hold any more daunting news), I can totally identify with the line from Isaiah: “...after a life of shadow and darkness...”

Heavy, heavy hearts for sure. My prayers become a never-ending litany begging for blessing:

- Forgive the sins of the selfish. Mine included! All too quick to point fingers and place blame.
- For peace among peoples of all nations and within our families and my own unsettled heart.
- For those who shed tears while managing the unknowns encompassing us: health issues, troubled relationships, the terrifying threat of war, and political tensions....

My list some days is endless. Thank goodness for Isaiah who assures us: “...the eyes of the blind will see.” And the psalmist proclaims: “Wait for God – stand tall and let your heart take courage.”

Do I ever beg for courage! I pray to be fully awake to that God who gifts me over and over again. “The lowly (sad and tired) will again rejoice...” and Jesus asks us: “Do you believe that I can do this? “Because of your faith, it will be done.” Mt 9: 29

PRAYER

Generous God, you have gifted me over and over again.

Open my eyes that I may see,

My ears that I may hear,

And my heart that I may love!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Before laying your head on your pillow tonight, consider:
for whom and for what do you ask abundant blessing?

*Jackie Schmitz, CSJ
Burr Ridge, IL*

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 7

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 at the sight of the crowds...

Ask the Master to send out laborers”

Mt 9: 36; 38

The readings for this seventh day of Advent are consoling and encouraging. Isaiah proclaims a God that is unimaginably near and amazingly caring. A God who answers our cries, does not hide God's self from us and whose own voice whispers in our ears. A God who personally binds up our wounds and who surrounds us with an abundance of good things: rich wheat, running streams, brilliant light. A Creator God who tenderly provides for all earth's creatures.

In the Gospel, Jesus makes this solicitous God tangible. He gazes upon the crowds and knows they are troubled and abandoned. His heart is moved with pity. He knows the harvest is great and the laborers are few. Jesus says, “Ask the Master to send laborers into this harvest” and then, as Master, immediately does exactly that. He sends his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God that is at hand. Are we only meant to ask or are we, who have experienced God's great goodness and love, not some of those Jesus sends?

PRAYER

God, who heals the broken-hearted
and binds up their wounds,
God, who fills my life with abundance,
move my heart with pity.
Send laborers into your harvest
and may I this day be one of them.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I look for the abundance and the nearness of God in my life today
and I proclaim the Kingdom of God is at hand.

*Marcella Clancy, CSJ
Detroit, MI*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 8

SCRIPTURE

Bar 5: 1-9

Ps 126: 1-6

Phil 1: 4-6, 8-11

Lk 3: 1-6

REFLECTION

*"...for God is leading (you) Israel in joy
by the light of God's glory,
with God's mercy and justice for company" Bar 5:9b*

Coming home. This phrase evokes belonging, safe haven, restoration, affection, healing, and joy; whether referring to the everyday respite of returning to one's "happy place," or to something as momentous as journeying from captivity in a distant land. The prophet and psalmist remind us that it is God who lights our path and leads the way, leveling the road for our smooth passage homeward.

Luke opens the curtain on the baptizer's ministry by narrating the historical backdrop of the oppressive regime that constrained the life and times of John—and Jesus. Unjust forces impact our age, too; we know them well. Our part is to keep turning toward God and assenting to the relationship becoming more and more mutual. So, we become the conduits— the "way," the "straight paths"— for God's saving work to be made manifest. We become home— belonging, safe haven, restoration, affection, healing, joy—for others "with God's mercy and justice for company." Loving God, we're always home sweet home.

PRAYER

May my love increase ever more and more, in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value...for the glory and praise of God. Phil 1

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Who needs my help to get closer to home?

*Mary Jo Curtsinger, CSJ
Chicago, IL*

MONDAY - DECEMBER 9
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

SCRIPTURE

Gen 3: 9-15, 20

Ps 98: 1-4

Eph 1: 3-6, 11-12

Lk 1: 26-38

REFLECTION

*“Chosen in Christ, before the foundation of the world . . .
to be holy that we might exist for God’s glory.” Eph. 1:11-22*
“In the beginning was Love . . .nothing has its being except in Love.
“(Jn.1).

Remember when you were awed by some creature’s radiance or remember when you knew you were transparent to Love. Love is always immaculately conceiving you and all creatures. In this experience of wholeness and holiness you were aligned with Love! Your whole being gave birth to God! We were all chosen before the foundation of the world and at every minute of our lives to be holy. It is our birthright!! We, like all creatures, are full of grace, born to magnify Love. Yet humans need to choose to stay aligned with Love.

Mary reveals our human capacity to listen deeply to the stirrings of Love and make choices aligned with the heart of God, who is always conceiving us into life. When we, like Mary, listen and surrender, our whole being Magnifies Love! Mary proves our vocation is possible. Happy Feast! Let Love be Magnified!

PRAYER

With all creation, listen to Love calling, “Hail full of Grace!
Blessed are you,
chosen to Mother God from the foundation of the world.
Holy are you.”

Ponder. Surrender. Let God/Love be Glorified!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today, listen deeply. Hear the invitation of Love. Relax. Let radiance of Love become you.

Pat Bergen, CSJ
Westchester, IL

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 10

SCRIPTURE

Is 40: 1-11

Ps 96: 1-3, and 10-13

Mt 18: 12-14

REFLECTION

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”

Mt 18:12-13

Although this parable is quite familiar to us, let us never grow accustomed to it. In reading today’s Gospel, I found myself glossing over it and saying, “Ahh, yes, the parable of the lost sheep. That’s an easy one to reflect on.” However, as I began to pray with it further, I realized how easy it is for me, as a modern reader of Jesus’ parables, to jump ahead to the end of the story without feeling the impact of its prophetic message. In my familiarity with this parable, I might be missing the incredibly profound message of Jesus’ intimate, personal, and unconditional love for me. This parable makes me wonder if I am one of the ninety-nine sheep or one of the lost sheep, and I am both. This parable invites me to sit with the joy and discomfort of knowing that Jesus loves me and is always seeking me out, even in my imperfection.

PRAYER

Jesus, my friend and companion,
may my heart always be open to your love and grace,
even when I feel lost or comfortably one of the 99.
May your unconditional love inspire me to a spirit of radical
hospitality towards all your flock.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each evening, I will pray in gratitude for your seeking of me and will pray for the grace to share that love with others.

*Erin McDonald, CSJ
Detroit, MI*

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 11

SCRIPTURE

Is 40: 25-31

Ps 103: 1-4, 8 and 10

Mt 11: 28-30

REFLECTION

“Bless the Lord, O my soul: let all that is within me bless his holy name.”

Psalms 103: vs. 1

We bless, praise, exalt, glorify, adore.

In this season of waiting, as we pray and sing and reflect, we can find the very real essence of this time. The music is glorious, and the prayers are steeped in profound words and thoughts. In church and in the quiet of our homes and prayer corners we bless. And then...

We step outside. Into a world of noise with the piped in music of the season everywhere and the ringing of bells asking for donations, and people who are just too busy to be polite.

Bless the Lord...hum a little of that canned music as you shop, drop a dollar or two into that bucket, smile at the person who pushes by you to be first in line.

We check our lists that become longer and the daylight shorter, our patience unravels as we search for that perfect gift. We don't have time to do the baking everyone expects.

Bless the Lord...take a breath, say a short prayer, light a candle. There will be time. We will still be loved even without the perfect gift or expected cookies.

Bless the Lord...let all that is within me bless...

All that is within me.

In the “outside chaos” of these days let us walk on the holy ground of snowy sidewalks, sit in warm rooms with family and friends, see the beauty in the leafless trees, hear the voices of the people we love, touch with gratitude the food we are offered and the hands that need our touch. All that is within me.

Bless his holy name.

PRAYER

Creator of this season of quiet and reflection, the deep heart of winter, help us to find all the blessings in whatever life puts in our path. Help us to bless, praise, exalt, glorify, and adore.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

To find all the ways I can, each day, to bless the Lord.

*Linda Matonich, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL*

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 12
OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

SCRIPTURE

Zec 2:14-17
Judith 13:18-19
Lk 1:26-38

REFLECTION

*“Shout aloud and rejoice, people of Zion!
I am coming, I will make my dwelling among you.”
Zec 2:14*

In 1531, outside of Mexico City on a hill at Tepeyac dedicated to the goddess, Tonantzin, Juan Diego, a poor, uneducated, indigenous peasant became an ambassador to bring a message to the Bishop of Mexico. A young lady appeared to Juan Diego and sent him with a sign to ask the bishop to build a church at the spot on Tepeyac. To the Mexican people Our Lady speaks of restoration of justice and is the visible love of God and God’s action on behalf of those who are poor. La Morenita (the little brown one), as she is lovingly called, is the expression of the love of God and tells us of God’s unconditional love and never-failing presence.

Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, says “Her presence and consoling words served to promote the human dignity of defeated people at the time of conquest and have continued ever since...” and “...the figure of La Virgin in their communities is a symbol of divine love, the people’s devotion as a mediated encounter with divine compassion.”

Theologian Jeannette Rodriguez tells us, “Our Lady of Guadalupe continues to stand for justice, solidarity with the oppressed, belonging, unconditional love” and “manifests the presence of God.”

God is here. Our Lady of Guadalupe is one more way that we know of this loving presence.

PRAYER

O Compassionate God, you tell us in many ways of your love and care for all people. Help us, too, to be a sign of your love for all people and all creation.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I will see the image of God in all I meet today.

*Joellen Sbrissa, CSJ
La Grange Park, IL*

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 13

SCRIPTURE

Is 48: 17-19

Ps 1: 1-4, 6

Mt 11: 16-19

REFLECTION

“If you would harken to my commandments, your peace would be like a river, and your justice as waves of the sea.” Is 48:18

Today we hear of God’s longing for us and our call to discernment. The reading from Isaiah speaks of God’s urging for us to listen to “the Holy One of Israel,” who can teach us “profitable things” and lead us in the right way to walk.

In the Gospel, Jesus expresses his frustration with people who will not be satisfied. They reject John the Baptist because of his austere life. They reject Jesus for the opposite, for eating and drinking with sinners. Following either one would turn their worlds upside down, requiring serious changes in their lives. Rejecting both John and Jesus allows them to ignore their demands. The passage concludes with: “But wisdom is vindicated by her works.” Again, we see God’s longing for us and offering us the invitation to choose wisdom. Both John and Jesus jolt us and push us into uncomfortable places. Discernment is a continuous process for those who seek wisdom.

PRAYER

God of life, help me become an ever-more discerning person, able to transcend my preconceived opinions and judgments in order to truly see what you want me to see.

Help me to trust more deeply in your ways, especially when they seem far from my initial desires or impulses.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today I will try to be more attentive to recognizing when and how I experience the Spirit of Wisdom speaking to me.

*Janet Fleischhacker, CSJ
Kalamazoo, MI*

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 14

SCRIPTURE

Sir 48: 1-4, 9-11

Ps 80: 2ac and 3b, 15-16, 18-19

Mt. 17: 9a, 10-13

REFLECTION

“Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.”

Ps 80

Let us pause in silence and reflect on the invitation to turn to the Lord so that we can see the Lord’s face. Stunning, bright, awesome, and radiant with Love. In *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean’s stunning last blessing and wish to his daughter and son-in-law is: “There is a truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God.” This is an invitation to us today also! Today’s Gospel reminds us that as the Lord comes down the mountain and says to tell the vision to no man (person), we must open the brightness of our lives, our human lives, our sinful lives, our saved lives to see and feel the loving presence of our Lord. To see and feel his presence is to see and to feel the presence of his loving Father. To see Jesus is to see the Face of the Creator. How do we see the Face of God? How do we feel God’s presence in the living, breathing, smiling, cooing child as He becomes our Savior. The wonderful John of the Cross reminds us today that “Silence is God’s first language.” Join me in silence and see the Face of God in the person of this child.

PRAYER

Pray with me: In the dark night of the soul, bright flows the river of God (John of the Cross).

Join me in prayer in the river of God.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today I will pause and feel, experience, and enjoy the Face of God through the face of the Child. How will I do that – how do I stop, pause, and experience today and everyday?

*Robert Labadie Funaro EdD and CSJ Associate
Grand Rapids, MI*

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT - DECEMBER 15

SCRIPTURE

Zep3:14-18a

Is 12:2-6

Phil 4:4-7

Lk 3:10-16

REFLECTION

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” Lk 3:16

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist is asked three times, “What should we do?” Each time he replies with some version of “Behave in caring and just ways.” People are looking outside themselves for direction, for wisdom.

According to John more is needed. He tells his followers that one mightier than he is coming who will “baptize (them) with the Holy Spirit and fire.” When we are truly baptized with the Holy Spirit, we are conscious of our alignment with the part of us that is already one with God, the Christ in us.

Being baptized with fire is a transformative process. Growing into our Christ identity involves the necessary process of healing the places in us that are not of Christ, i.e. our ego drives, wounds, and judgments. When we live from the Christic within, like Jesus, we speak and act with inner authority. Our doing isn’t predicated on outside directives. Our doing flows from our being in God.

PRAYER

Holy One, May we grow in the truth of who we are in Christ.

Grace us with compassion and courage
to do the inner work that is necessary for us
to more fully claim the Christ in us
and in every kind of neighbor. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Contemplate on Thomas Merton’s quote:
“Advent is the beginning of the end of all, in us,
that is not yet Christ.”

*Bridget Sperduto, CSJ Associate
Bend, OR*

MONDAY - DECEMBER 16

SCRIPTURE

Nm 24: 2-7, 15-17a

Ps 25: 4-5ab, 6 and 7bc, 8-9

Mt 21: 23-27

REFLECTION

*“The utterance of one whose eye is true, who hears what God says,
and knows what the Most High knows...*

Who sees what the Almighty sees...” Nm 24:3c-4c

“It’s all about perspective” we hear, and in Numbers we see a leader acting from a perspective of fear. The land is being encroached upon by another people. A prophet is consulted with the expectation that the prophet will curse the in-coming and prevent their growth. But when the prophet raises his eyes and looks, the Sacred One reveals a vision of fruitfulness, abundance, strength, and expansiveness. The prophet cannot curse and can only bless. Seeing with sacred eyes is like that.

Perhaps you, like me, have had a similar experience and responded from a fearful point of view. Unable to see more, I curse or reject what is before me. Pondering this reaction, I ask to see with sacred eyes so that, like the Sacred One, I can encounter the “different” in a new way. In this way, fruitfulness, abundance, strength, and expansiveness come to sight and I can only bless. Seeing with sacred eyes is like that.

PRAYER

With the Psalmist I pray, “Teach me your ways, O God.

Your ways make known to me.

Guide me in your truth, for you are God.” Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today I look with Sacred Eyes upon a fear or concern I have and open myself to see anew.

*Karen Salsbery
Wichita, KS*

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 17

SCRIPTURE

Gen. 49: 2, 8-10

Ps. 72: 1-4, 7-8, 17

Mt.: 1: 1-17

REFLECTION

*“May the tribes of the earth give blessings with his name;
may all the nations regard him as favored.” Ps. 72: 17*

One of the responsibilities I had when I worked in a school was to prepare students to be lectors for the weekly school liturgy. One morning the reader came to me panic stricken. He reported the reading was filled with “begots” and a lengthy list of names he had neither heard nor knew how to pronounce. The passage was from Matthew and begins with a roster of the generations of ancestors who “begot” Jesus, including such tongue twisters as Amminadab, Zerubbabel, and Rehoboam. No wonder he panicked! So did I!

Years later, I still found it difficult to reflect on this passage until I thought about how the ancestors who begot me shaped the faith that is the foundation of my relationship with God even today. My Irish heritage included the family rosary made special because of the rosaries my grandmother gave each of her grandchildren on their First Communion Day. The blue crystal beads were a treasure to behold. Father Sharp, the pastor of my elementary school, brought the entire school to church every Tuesday for “Bible History Class” where he retold, with great dramatic flair, stories of the Old Testament. David and Goliath had us on the edge of our pews! High School years were shaped by the challenges of Vatican II and Pope John XXIII’s invitation to reclaim Scripture. Formation experiences and theology studies were gifts that deepened and expanded my understanding of God, Grace, and the glory of all creation.

I will think about those faith shaping experiences today and be grateful for the persons and events that formed my consciousness of how God continues to work in my life and in the world. I will also wonder what I might do to shape the faith of the next generation of believers. I invite you to do the same. You never know what you will beget!

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for the persons and events that are the foundation of my faith. They are the conduits through which you often reveal your gracious presence in my life and in the world. Continue to help me recognize, respond, and be grateful for those moments of grace that are present in my life each day.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Today I will pray for the generations of my own ancestors
whose unwavering faith continues to inspire me.

*Jean McGrath, CSJ
Chicago, IL*

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 18

SCRIPTURE

Jer 23:5-8

Ps 72:1-2,12-13,18-19

Mt 1: 18-25

REFLECTION

"...You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. ...they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'

Mt. 1: 21, 23

Naming is used in scripture to establish authority or to indicate the beginning of something significant or a new direction. In the ancient world a name expresses essence. Thus, Jesus is to be named Savior, Emmanuel, "God with us." Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown states that "the identity of Jesus is a divine revelation, not a human deduction."

Note the references in today's readings to David, Judah, Israel, Moses, and Sinai connecting Jesus as the One who sums up Israel's story. Not only Israel, but we will also come to believe as the story unfolds. In fact, it is in Jesus that all of history finds its meaning. The Father confirms his approval of Jesus in our final gospel of the Christmas season. This is expressed in each of the synoptic accounts of the Baptism of the Lord. Listen as the Father proclaims, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

PRAYER

Come, Leader of the House of Israel, come to rescue us with your mighty power! Come, Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace! Come, Lord Jesus! Come, be with us! Ready our hearts, Christ Jesus!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each child's name is a sacred trust.

How does your name express who God is calling you to become for the sake of the cosmos?

*Cynthia Sabathier, CSJ
Baton Rouge, LA*

THURSDAY - DECEMBER 19

SCRIPTURE

Judges 13: 2-7, 24-25

Ps 71: 3-6, 16-17

Lk 1: 5-25

REFLECTION

*“Though you are barren and have no children...” Judges 13: 3
...they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren... Lk 1: 7*

UGH! Enough already about barren women and, even to this very day, “childless cat ladies.” To what end is the focus here on two bereft and scandalized women who can be saved from “disgrace before others” only by late-in-life pregnancies?

Perhaps the best we can do is tease out from the readings a tiny bit of progress in the 1200 or so years between the births of Samson and John the Baptist.

The nameless mother of Samson from the Judges passages is described merely as “His wife” and “The woman,” with no lineage other than her husband’s offered. All we learn about this mom is that she apparently did what she was ordered to do by a “man of God” and bore a son.

The mother of John, as described in the Gospel of Luke, is “from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.” So at least this mom has her own identity—a family and a name in her own right.

Beyond this particular Gospel passage, we can appreciate Elizabeth in a much richer way. Keep reading and reflecting – Lk 1: 39-66 – for a fuller revelation of her grace and blessedness.

PRAYER

Infinite Indwelling Love, awaken human hearts to the awareness that your invitation to each of us – female and male – is always and only to birth YOU into the world.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Don’t stand silent while cultures and traditions continue to judge women based on whether or how they bear children.

*Barbara Foreman, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL*

FRIDAY - DECEMBER 20

SCRIPTURE

Is.7:10-14

Ps.24:1-5

LK.1:26-38

REFLECTION

“Ask Yahweh, your God for a sign for yourself.

The Lord will give you a sign. (Is. 10 & 14)

Rejoice oh highly favored! The Lord is with you.

Do not be afraid, you have won God’s favor.

For nothing is impossible to God.” (Lk.1: 29 & 37)

Do you believe in signs? Have you ever asked God for a sign? Did you ever experience a sign during a significant life transition or during times of uncertainty? As people of prayer, we are offered moments to notice inner and outer signs. These signs guide us as we listen and respond with our loving YES. We give birth, much like Mary, to whom God calls us to become-bearers of God’s love, light, and hope. God invites each of us to know and believe. Like Mary, YOU are highly favored! God sees you - your inner beauty and your strengths/struggles. You are so loved that God chooses you to become for others God’s loving presence. This Advent are you being asked to become a beacon of God’s light, love, and hope? Do you believe you are a sign for others in times of uncertainty, as we experience so many changes in our daily lives, families, communities and world?

PRAYER

God of many small signs, thank you for favoring me. You have a way of calling me to become “more.” As I live into each day, be with me as I notice the small signs that lead me to radiate love. As I radiate love, let me be a healing presence for our hurting and broken world.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

As you anticipate celebrating Christmas, take time to notice the signs that are yours to see.

Be embraced by the depth of God’s love. Embrace the dear neighbor with this same love.

*Linda Bronersky, CSJ Associate
Bolingbrook, IL*

SATURDAY - DECEMBER 21

SCRIPTURE

Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zep 3:14-18a

Ps 33: 2-3, 11-12, 20-21

Lk 1: 39-45

REFLECTION

*“Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.”*

Song of Songs 2:14

Placing this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth just four days before Christmas highlights for me the significance of their relationship. Both readings provide a unique and beautiful scene. Unique because the focus is on Elizabeth, who makes her only appearance in the Scriptures in Chapter 1 of Luke’s Gospel, and beautiful because friendship between women is rarely documented in the Bible. The Song of Songs further underscores the joy they have when seeing each other. “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.” Elizabeth is elated with her visitor, even the “infant in her womb leapt for joy.” Elizabeth is Spirit wise in her comments to Mary, encouraging her to believe “what was spoken to you by the Lord.” Blessed are we if we have known this delight and received such insight from a friend or family member.

PRAYER

“Whoever confers benefits will be amply enriched, and whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” (Prov 11:25) Loving God,
thank you for the Elizabeths in my life.

Those who truly know me and love me still, those who inspire,
challenge, and forgive me.

May I be a true friend in return. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Recognize today how much you know about God
because of the people who love you.

*Marianne Race, CSJ
Brookfield, IL*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT - DECEMBER 22

SCRIPTURE

Micah 5:1-4a

Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Heb 10: 5-10

Luke 1: 39-45

REFLECTION

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Lk 1: 42

This story of Mary visiting Elizabeth is very familiar to us, and this line, which Elizabeth says to Mary, is perhaps even more familiar as part of the Hail Mary in Catholic devotional prayer. I invite you to use your imagination and go beyond the veil of familiarity to see and hear some new insights about this event. Imagine Mary traveling toward Jerusalem to a village on a hill, Ein Kerem, where Zachariah and Elizabeth had a home (some scholars say a summer home away from the big city of Jerusalem). Having been to Ein Kerem, I and many others, can attest to its beauty even today, with lush greenery and a unique church of the Visitation, surrounded by plaques of the Magnificat in a wide variety of languages. Two women, younger and older, greet each other joyfully in a modern sculpture in the courtyard. There is peace and beauty.

Insight 1: Joy in seeing each other, gratitude in being together, younger helping older, pregnant women.

Insight 2: Hospitality, of God, of Elizabeth and Zachariah, of Mary, in housing the baby Jesus in embryo.

So, joyful, grateful hospitality is the grace we ask for. That our own lives be Spirit-filled is our prayer. So that we, who house the newly to be born, may birth joy and hope and peace daily in our world, so in need of grace.

PRAYER

Hospitable God, Love of our lives, be born in us anew this Christmas.

Strengthen our joy and make us grateful for your gracious gifts,
for Life itself.

Deepen our joy, as we welcome you once again. Amen

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

As we get closer to Christmas, I will gratefully pray that joy and hope be born anew.

*Janet Franklin, CSJ
New Roads, LA*

MONDAY - DECEMBER 23

SCRIPTURE

Mal 3: 1-4, 23-24

Ps 25: 4-5ab, 8-9, 10 and 14

Lk 1: 57-66

REFLECTION

“When it was time for Elizabeth’s baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. And when her neighbors and relatives heard that God had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her.”

Lk 1:57-58

The world we inhabit can be such a trial. Inflation, bullying, natural disasters, war, oppression...all of these are truths we live with. It is challenging to recognize the blessings that surround us and others when life tempts us to focus on what we lack in life instead of what God has given us. And it can be tough to rejoice with others when they seem to have what we want or think we need. So how do we shift our focus?

What bears fruit most of the time for me is to cultivate contentment by donning an attitude of gratitude. Focusing on God and my daily blessings helps me to appreciate the abundance that surrounds me and others. I am reminded that I am ONE with the human family, which makes their sorrow my sorrow, and their joy mine as well. When I am in my healthiest space, I choose to expect joy. Even if joy is not my initial experience, I can expect it as an end result, because I am a beloved of God, just as you are. And what could be more joyful than that?

PRAYER

God, it is tempting to focus on the bad news that surrounds us.

Open my heart to notice

the blessings of others and to rejoice with them.

Make my joy contagious!

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Each evening, I will take a few minutes to name three

God-blessings I received

and three received by others today. And I will rejoice!

*Judith Minear, CSJ
Cleveland, OH*

TUESDAY - DECEMBER 24
MASS IN THE MORNING

SCRIPTURE

2 Sam 4: 1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

Ps 89: 2-5, 27, 29

Lk 1: 67-69

REFLECTION

*"...the daybreak from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who sit in darkness...,
and to guide our feet in the way of peace." Lk 1: 78-79*

I love the Song of Zechariah! It reminds us that we should be under no illusions about the One who truly is in charge of our world and when we immerse ourselves in the darkness and chaos of the moment, we are embracing hubris. When we try to blindly "fix things" without the guidance of the Holy, we find ourselves at a loss. We need only wait patiently for the Dawn to break and our way forward will show itself clearly. It feels as if things are falling apart all around us. Fear, hatred and violence, misinformation and disinformation are the darkness in which we are sitting, waiting for the daybreak, but patience and attentiveness will pay off, just as it did for Zechariah.

PRAYER

Holy One, help me to remain attentive to your coming Light
which will guide me forward in the true way of peace.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

My challenge is to be aware of the moments of Light in the
darkness around me
and use those moments to inspire my actions.

*Tess Bezouska, CSJ Associate
La Grange, IL*

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 25 - VIGIL MASS

SCRIPTURE

Is 62: 1-5

Ps 89: 4-5, 16-17, 27, 29

Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25

Mt 1:1-25

REFLECTION

*"I have made a covenant with my chosen one...
Forever I will maintain my kindness toward my chosen one,
and my covenant with my chosen one stands firm." Ps 89: v.2 &29*

"When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit... All this took place to fulfill what the 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 1:18 & 22

Every year we read these same readings for the Christmas Vigil Liturgy. And every year we try to take them into our hearts as we welcome the birth of God's Word into our world once again. We try to hold onto their meaning, reflect on them, consider what is being born in us as we welcome God's Word each Christmas. For most of us, however, I suspect that as soon as we walk out of church or leave our prayer space, we are once again overwhelmed by the cultural elements of this sacred feast which barely recognizes the source of its festivities. And yet, what could it mean for our lives if we truly believed and lived out of God's promise that we are God's chosen ones, recipients of God's covenant? What if we truly believed that God is with us today, tomorrow, every day—incarnated in our very being? What difference might that make in us, and those around us, as we move through each day—today and tomorrow and tomorrow?

PRAYER

Holy One, as we celebrate Jesus' birth,
I welcome your incarnation in my being.
I pray that I can live each day as the unique incarnation
of your presence in our world
that you have created me to be.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Tonight, I will spend time reflecting on how I have been present to God and how I have been an incarnation of God's presence in my being and doing throughout the day.

*Christine Parks, CSJ
Kalamazoo, MI*

WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 25

MASS DURING THE DAY

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98:1-6

Hebrews 1:1-6

John 1:1-5, 9-14

REFLECTION

"In the beginning. . .

The light shines in the darkness. . . Jn 1:5

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

Filled with enduring love." Jn 1:14

Some may be disappointed not to hear the traditional infancy accounts from either Matthew or Luke, but on this Christmas day, we hear the beginning of John's Gospel, full of the meaning of the feast we celebrate. "In the beginning" is the same beginning of the book of Genesis, which describes creation. Thus, John begins with the new creation in Christ. The Word of God, which breathed and spoke creation in Genesis is now en-fleshed, in-carnate, in human form, just like us. Jesus is, in fact, with us providing light in the darkest moments of our lives, our world. "He made his dwelling among us" in the original language was actually: "He pitched his tent in our midst." Jesus was born to live with us, among us, close to us. The birth of Jesus is the expression of God's enduring love. This Gospel, which we hear today, is full of meaning and truth. Rather than telling us of the historical birth of Jesus, John reveals the meaning of this wonderful and amazing birth.

PRAYER

Oh God of all creation, give us the grace to more deeply believe and understand the meaning of the Incarnation, the birth of Christ in our world and in our lives and hearts.

May we notice Christ's presence dwelling ever within us and among us.

Let us real-ize the enduring love of God especially on this feast day, and on each day we live. Amen.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

As Christmas gifts are opened this day, I will be attentive to the great gift of the birth of Christ. I will strive to open my heart so that Christ will come and be born anew in me.

*Sallie Latkovich, CSJ
Ft. Myers, FL*



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