

Waiting in Joyful Hope

*Daily Reflections for
Advent and Christmas
2020–2021*

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Introduction

Come down, begged Isaiah, that the mountains might quake and the nations tremble. As fire makes water swell and seethe, so will your wondrous deeds be known across the earth, promises the prophet (Isa 63:19b-64:1a). I stand in my dark kitchen, watching the water in the glass kettle swell and seethe as it comes to a boil, and contemplate Isaiah's images. Bubbles tumble about, irrepressible, ever changing, refracting the blue light of the flame until the water seems to glow of its own accord.

For all that I yearn for a season filled with quiet and prayerful moments to spend preparing for God's coming, it is not to be. Like the water in the kettle, my Advents seethe, boiling over with things to be done and people to be seen. Yet despite the end-of-year chaos—or perhaps because of it—the rich images in the Advent Scriptures dance irrepressibly through my days. They spill forth light, shining beacons in the drear days. They draw me deeply into the superluminous darkness where God dwells.

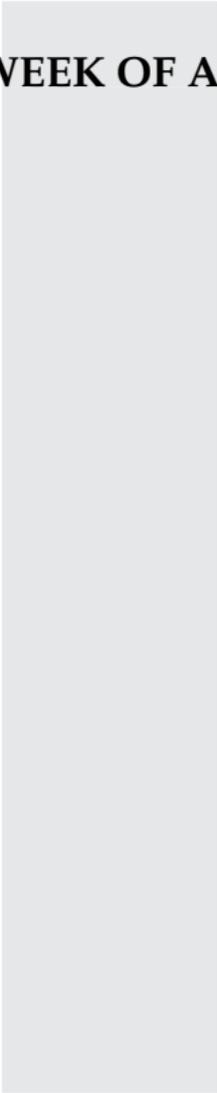
I find in Advent not so much a refuge from the demands of my life and of the world as a series of mysterious contradictions that leave me slightly off balance. The Scriptures of this season promise us light in the midst of the darkness, but they also make clear the demands the kindling of such a light place upon us. They disrupt my preconceptions about what it means that God has come to dwell among us, forcing me

to come face-to-face with what it means for me, here and now, to encounter God in human form. These readings put flesh on hope.

In his General Audience last Advent, Pope Francis spoke of the manger as an invitation to contemplation, a reminder of the importance of stopping. Contemplation is sometimes called the art of stealing time. I hope that you can manage to steal a few moments each day this Advent and Christmas season to listen to God's irrepressible, radiant Word, so that its fire might re-ignite a flame in your heart.

For all that Advent propels us toward Christmas, the stable in Bethlehem is not a destination. It is a way station, a momentary gathering of those who will be dispatched to all corners of the earth. Strangers and shepherds and angels stop and then depart as quickly as they came. Not to follow the same paths they came by but to be sent out on new roads and to new lives. May our lives, too, be open to being astonished by what God has done and is doing in the world. And may we always be a people working in joyful hope for the coming of God's kingdom.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

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Tear Open the Heavens

Readings: Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

Scripture:

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for.
(Isa 63:19b; 64:2)

Reflection: I cannot think of Advent without thinking of Alfred Delp, SJ, who in 1944 spent the Advent and Christmas seasons in prison. Delp's writings, letters, and reflections on Advent were smuggled out from prison on scraps of paper by two friends. In one letter, he wrote that he thought it would be a beautiful Christmas. How, you might wonder? Delp was handcuffed night and day and confined to a small cell, facing a death sentence. There would be no moving liturgies, no exquisite manger scenes. But with all the ornaments and romantic imagery stripped away, Delp said he could see clearly the shaking reality of what Christmas promised: God in the flesh, God taking a stand with us against the unimaginable darkness. Christmas, offered Delp, is the chance to celebrate the mystery of the great howling hunger of humankind for God—if we are willing to give over our complacency and pretensions.

In Advent's dark and cold days I am, I confess, often drawn to meditate on the gentle mysteries of a babe wrapped and warm, puffy sheep in the fields and angels in the sky trailing glory. Wondrous stars. Enigmatic strangers from the East. Gold and rare spices. It is the proper and cherished stuff of Christmas pageants. Yet this isn't quite what the people of God asked for through Isaiah. We begged God to tear open the heavens and come down, we pleaded with God to be what we don't dare hope for.

Dare we join with Isaiah and cry out to the heavens this Advent, imploring God to do for us what we cannot bring ourselves to hope for? Might the hungry be fed, might the migrant find safe harbor, might God visit peace on the nations? Shine forth from your cherubim throne, O Lord. Rouse your power and rend the heavens. Come and save us!

Meditation: Delp wrote that to live in the knowledge that the Divine and the human have collided in time requires a willingness to let our romantic notions be burned off, that we might have a clear vision of what is and could be. As Advent lays before us, what do you desire most from God this season, the one thing you dare not hope for?

Prayer: Lord, you loved us enough to tear open the heavens and come to our aid. Rouse your power and come again, show us your face that we might be saved. May we have the patience to wait and the courage to hope.

Reaching to the Ends of the Earth

Readings: Rom 10:9-18; Matt 4:18-22

Scripture:

*Their voice has gone forth to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.* (Rom 10:18b)

Reflection: When I was a young professor it was customary to write to other scientists and ask for a copy of their recent work that you wished to read. Whenever I published a new scientific paper, postcards from all over the world would appear in my mailbox, asking that I send them a copy. Some requests came from places I could not imagine going: from universities in Cuba and the Soviet Union. My words had seemingly gone out to the ends of the earth. Now we can reach the ends of the earth and beyond with a few taps on our phone, our words visible even to astronauts on the International Space Station.

St. Andrew and his fellow apostles were sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news, to be a voice for the Gospel even to the ends of the earth. But this is not just a job for the apostles and their successors. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis firmly reminds us that we are all, by virtue of our baptism, called to be evangelists, disciples on a mission to all the world. All of us are to raise our voices, living and proclaiming the joy of the Gospel. Do

not think that you need special training or must wait to be invited, Pope Francis advises. We can rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide us as well as the gifts the Spirit brings to us: of wisdom and strength and understanding. We must allow the deep joy that comes with our faith to bubble up in every encounter, whether we are whispering words of encouragement to a friend in distress or tweeting the latest news to the ends of the world. Go forth and proclaim the Good News!

Meditation: Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary, advised St. Francis of Assisi. In what ways is the joy of the good news, that God has come to earth and lives among us, visible in your life? How is God calling you to be an evangelist?

Prayer: You are the Word made flesh, O Lord, that speaks to us of joy and of mercy. Help us proclaim you to all the world, in our every action as in our every word.