

Waiting in Joyful Hope

*Daily Reflections for
Advent and Christmas
2021–2022*

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Introduction

When I started this project, I had a confident sense of my understanding of the Advent and Christmas seasons. I still do. But I have to say that engaging with the texts of Scripture so directly for each day has renewed my conviction that we can always expect God to be about making things new. Having gotten used to the cadence of the readings each year of my life is comforting, but what is wonderful is how I will inevitably hear something new or previously unnoticed in the familiar readings. It's like being given fresh ears or new hearing aids!

The Scriptures, of course, do not change; our lives, however, do change. We bring ourselves to the Bible's stories and teachings—our life circumstances make us curious in new ways, our learnings and leanings evolve over time, and our once firm set of expectations fade away. It is in this dialogue between sacred texts and our life experiences that we discover God still at work in us and in our world. We find that familiar passages take on layers of meaning when we allow God to speak through them with study and prayer.

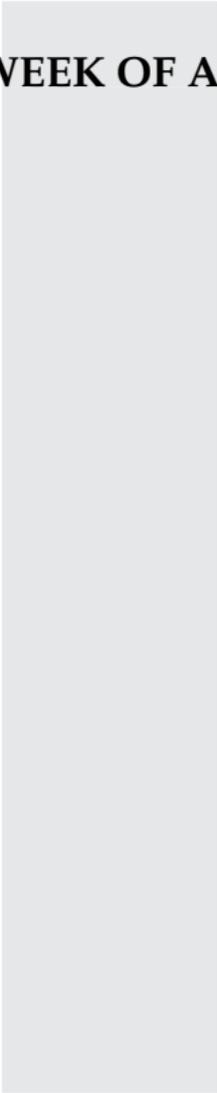
As I completed this collection of reflections on the daily readings for the Advent and Christmas seasons, for some reason I thought of a simple necklace of mine that is made of mabe pearls. These pearls are not the typically round ones, but have a flat wavy appearance. They come in lustrous shades of silvery white, pinks, blues, and greens. The first time my necklace broke, I lost a few of the pearls but strung

it back together. By the third time (obviously it is well worn), I realized I needed to knot between each bead to ensure I wouldn't lose any more of them shimmying across a floor. Each day of readings struck me as one of those pearls, each one with its own particular odd shape calling attention to itself while at the same time wanting to be part of the whole.

Advent is a time to anticipate the whole. It brings together centuries of expectation and longing and invites us to imagine the world anew, to pick up the beads of tradition and see how beautifully they fit together in a new and fresh arrangement. The Christmas season wraps up this freshness and presents it as a gift to a world in need of beauty. Just as great artists agonize over the pieces they create and often live in poverty while creating a body of work, the beauty that God offers us in these seasons may ask something of us—releasing some preconceived ideas, spending time and energy, and some soul searching.

The Advent and Christmas seasons are filled already with obligations and activities, some of them connected with our parish communities, and you may wonder how in the world you will fit in one more thing. But, just maybe, you and I can make our few minutes with the readings each day not “one more thing” but the best thing.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

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Shake Off the Drowsiness

Readings: Jer 33:14-16; 1 Thess 3:12–4:2; Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Scripture:

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy. . . .”
(Luke 21:34)

Reflection: When traveling with my brother and his family some years ago, we stopped in a local grocery store known for its back-room diner and piles of fish served family style. The evening we sat down there at a simple table, we were happily exhausted after a day in the sun, and when the plates of food arrived we dug in. It wasn't long before my young nephew's head was bobbing as he fought off sleep. He'd catch himself and sit up straight, and then in no time at all he'd be bobbing drowsily again. His heavy eyelids were our signal to get the kids to bed. We adults weren't far behind. This kind of drowsiness is the kind we long for, knowing we'll have a good night's sleep ahead.

The drowsiness that Jesus warns against is the kind that allows us to shut our eyes, not from weariness, but out of willful ignorance, or laziness, or even selfishness. We wish we could avoid the difficult situations in our lives. We hope we will not have to do the hard work of righting a wrong. We want to turn off the news and ignore the plight of others whose needs make us uncomfortable. These anxieties of

daily life can have a numbing effect on us. Jesus knew this well, and he shook his disciples awake. He shook them with his words, his encounters, and his critique of the world in which he and his disciples found themselves. He shakes us awake too, urging us to be alert to what is happening in and around us.

Meditation: As we begin this season of expectation, we are awakened to a different rhythm. We become aware once again that it is not enough merely to go through the motions of daily life. In these weeks, we allow our hearts and minds to be attuned to God-in-the-world—in the past, in the present, and in the future. Advent reminds us that God is already at work. Does this truth quicken our hearts and shape our relationships with the world?

Prayer: Jesus, rouse us from our drowsiness. Help us sit upright, listen for your voice, and watch for your presence. Create in us the desire and the will to enter into each day of this season anticipating how we will be asked to help others know your saving presence.

Take Instruction

Readings: Isa 2:1-5; Matt 8:5-11

Scripture:

“Come, let us climb the LORD’s mountain . . .
That he may instruct us in his ways,
and we may walk in his paths.” (Isa 2:3)

Reflection: Our best teachers continue to have a place in our hearts. We look up to them, for their wisdom and their kindness, for their honor and their strength. How fitting that “looking up” to others is the way we express admiration for those we wish to imitate—a strict teacher we discover showing compassion for a struggling student, a demanding mentor who draws from us gifts we did not know we had, or a parent whose discipline is wise and forward thinking. In his own way, the prophet Isaiah invites God’s people to look up to the best instructor of all. They are to ascend the hills of Jerusalem to the house of God, the temple. The instruction they receive will get them in shape to walk in the ways of God.

We also are being asked to get in shape, to open our ears and our hearts, and to figuratively strap on our shoes so that we are ready to walk in God’s way. Today’s passage from Isaiah gives us a key to God’s instruction. Speaking for God, Isaiah describes a world where swords will no longer be needed and nations will no longer train for war. The Second

Vatican Council takes up this call, saying, “People of the present generation should realize that they will have to render an account of their warlike behavior.” While this may sound naïve, it is nonetheless the vision that is ahead of us as we learn to walk the path God lays out for us.

Meditation: How ardently do we hope to be instructed in God’s ways? Do we create opportunities through Bible study and prayer? Through friendships with others who also love God? Through spiritual reading that is uplifting and challenging? Consider this day how such instruction has informed your life, not just as a child but as an adult, with adult concerns and responsibilities. On this Advent day, will you ascend God’s mountain in your own heart and find God ready to speak with you? Will you be ready to listen, even if God’s words are difficult to digest?

Prayer: Equip us, O God, with minds and hearts ready to imagine a world where plowshares are more necessary than weapons, and food more plentiful than swords. Strengthen our resolve to learn your ways and recognize your path. Give us the grace to stay the course.