

Waiting in Joyful Hope

*Daily Reflections for
Advent and Christmas
2023–2024*

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Introduction

As 8:00 a.m. Mass began in our Rocky Mountain town on the First Sunday of Advent last year, the world was still dark outside the stained glass windows. Snow-falling-on-snow had made the roads challenging. Nevertheless, the church was filled with bright, warm energy as those present fervently joined us musicians in the gathering hymn: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Voices rose and faces shone as the congregation leaned into that ancient litany of O Antiphons, claiming kinship with centuries of worshippers who have intoned that hymn’s hopes, fears, and longings in the year’s darkest time.

Christians often say that we’re an “Easter people,” and certainly that’s true—Christ’s resurrection, with its promise of salvation, is everything. Yet these winter weeks, too, speak to our situation as people challenged always and everywhere to maintain hope despite the “clouds of night” manifested in our lives as sickness, loneliness, sorrow, and eventually death.

How much this Advent-Christmas time has to teach us about the practice of faith year-round! Advent’s waiting trains us in essential patience. The virtues often honored on its four Sundays—hope, love, joy, and peace—echo the eternal future promised to the faithful, while reminding us that even now we can be sharing these gifts with our weary world. The Christmas season reminds us of God’s timeless faithfulness, inviting us to relax into the assurance of divine

love, to live our faith with resolve as the liturgy replays the marvels of our Savior's earliest days.

It's sad, then, that these weeks are often experienced as speedy, busy, fleeting. For so many, if Advent is recognized at all, it disappears in a blur of restless yearning and frantic attempts to engineer the perfect holiday. The two weeks of Christmas become an afterthought, a time to recuperate.

But you've opened this book, indicating a desire to make space, to focus on the season's Scriptures. Pope Francis has encouraged such daily practice, emphasizing that we should not delay in seeking God, but should seize the present moment as the proper time. The present, after all, is where we live. It is where God finds us.

In that spirit, I hope this book helps you savor every day of this year's Advent-Christmas celebration. I pray it encourages you to claim kinship with all those who have from age to age found such reassurance, such bright joy, in these familiar words of Scripture.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel. Slow us down, help us listen.
Comfort us, rescue us, set us free.*



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT



The Discipline of Hope

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

Scripture:

[T]he testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:6-7)

Reflection: Symbolizing hope, the Advent wreath's first candle invites joyful anticipation, both of the celebration of Christ's birth and of the host of other joys the Advent and Christmas seasons offer.

Everyone craves hope, but I'll bet your experience, like mine, has emphasized how hard hope is to sustain over an extended period of drought. Paul acknowledged that fact, reminding the Romans that those who hope are by definition in a state of suspended, trust-based anticipation—a state vulnerable to the whispers of doubt and distraction. Even the disciplined St. Teresa of Avila encountered these temptations. "Watch carefully," she advised her soul, "for everything passes quickly, even though your impatience makes doubtful what is certain, and turns a very short time into a long one."

Yet there's a way to keep our hope secure, a discipline embraced by Paul, Teresa, and legions of ordinary Christians:

while we wait, we can commit to living as though we really, truly believe Jesus' coming is imminent, reforming our hearts *now*, actively seeking him *today*. Our first reading invites us to do just that, encouraging us to identify as people who, despite past transgressions, are eager for God's coming, ready to reconcile, firm in faith.

This year Advent is as short as it can be: just twenty-two days. And so, more than ever, the weeks ahead offer an invitation to practice and maintain resolute hopefulness. What daily rituals of prayer, reading, and charity can you incorporate into this short season, to affirm your faith and hope?

Meditation: Working toward creating something beautiful can help foster patient hope during Advent. One simple option might be to bring dormant narcissus (small, fragrant daffodil) bulbs to winter bloom on a windowsill. (Look for them at garden centers or superstores.) More substantively, revive a dormant friendship by “watering” it with love and bringing it into the sun of ongoing attention.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, may faithful, patient hope inspire my Advent practices this year.

Dreaming of Accord among the Nations

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

Scripture:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares . . .
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again. (Isa 2:4)

Reflection: “But won’t Ukraine be ‘old news’ by the time your book is published?” my friend asked. When I told her I’d be reflecting on beating “swords into plowshares,” she assumed I’d be alluding to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. “That sounded harsh,” she apologized, “but you know what I mean. There will be new wars by then.”

She’s right. Even if the war in Ukraine rages on, there will be new wars, each conflict’s suffering just as raw and timelessly tragic.

One particularly painful aspect of this repetition is its cost to human flourishing. Those who conquer more often than not find that the resources they hoped to exploit have become a devastated mess, incapable of agricultural production or any other yield, potential workers dazed, damaged, resentful.

When will they ever learn? as we used to sing in my idealistic 1960s youth. The cycle of aggressive violence seems unbreakable, soul-shattering in its predictability.

The pairing of today's first reading and Gospel, however, invites us to imagine a different future. Isaiah's idealistic scene offers a dream of accord (and dreaming, it's said, is a first step toward doing). Matthew's story presents a remarkable precedent for détente—for truce—in this world, depicting a military commander who, though a representative of hated Roman occupiers, humbles himself in faith. Nothing is impossible with God, that story demonstrates: not physical healing, not the healing of cultural enmity.

Drawing on Advent's spirit of hope, let us dare to resist our ancient tendency toward tribal warfare. In our words and deeds, let us help ourselves and others imagine what peace might look like.

Meditation: Though ending the sad cycle of national conflicts might be beyond our power, every one of us has the capacity to comfort war's victims. If your community is accepting refugees, consider reaching out personally to newcomers. Befriend a family; ask someone to coffee or lunch; help strangers navigate new places and customs by accompanying them to the grocery store or doctor's office.

Prayer: May I walk in the light of your peace, Loving Savior, modeling it for others.