

An Advent of Giving

Readings and Reflections for the Advent Season 2018
based on the Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings

Volume 1: December 1 – 15, 2018

This devotional contains readings, reflections, and prayers for a portion of the Advent season. We ask you to read the Scripture, meditate on the message, pray the prayer – and add a non-perishable food item to a box or bag. Bring them with you to worship the next Sunday. We will deliver them to the Food Basket.

If you are using this resource in some place and time that you cannot worship at Church of the Holy Cross, please bring your food gifts to a convenient hunger ministry.

Saturday, December 1

Psalm 25:4

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.*

In our life's journey, there are many advents – new things arise more quickly than we dare to realize. There are also many Advents, as each year brings this season to prepare for celebrating the gift of Jesus.

Both advents and Advents invite us to ask whether we continue to follow the ways of God. In this Advent devotional, we will focus on one steady feature of God's highway, the direction to give. As you prepare this season's gifts, think back: Can you even guess at how many times God has invited you to be generous?

Prayer:

O God, with this Advent we will journey a little further along your way, the way of faith, and love, and giving. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Sunday, December 2

1 Thessalonians 3:12

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

What a curious blessing. Should not the Apostle Paul have written something like this: "May the Lord increase the love of others for you, just as we (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) abound in love for you"?

What kind of blessing is it to invite someone to love someone else?

Love, we know, is the most demanding obligation we ever take on. Love demands our patience. Love demands our time. Love demands our thinking. Love demands our money. Love demands our labor and our tears.

Yet that was the deepest, most meaningful benediction the apostle could offer. May the Lord increase your love.

Prayer:

O God, increase our love for one another and for all. With this new item in the basket, increase our love. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 3

Numbers 17:5, 8

[God said to Moses,] "And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout; thus I will put a stop to the complaints of the Israelites that they continually make against you." When Moses went into the tent of the covenant on the next day, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted. It put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds.

Not once, but several times, Moses had to be told to let others take on some of the work. His father-in-law told him so. His brother Aaron told him so. In this passage, God told him so.

The result, sad to say, was *not* that people stopped complaining. That was too much to expect.

God hinted at the result, however, with the very sign that gave Aaron and his family leadership of worship. The staff budded, blossomed, and even bore edible almonds. It was a sign that there was more to share.

Moses gave away responsibility and authority. Aaron, in turn, shared increased blessings.

Prayer:

What power can I give to someone else, O God, that will help their work bear fruit? Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 4

Psalms 90:1

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

It must be nice to be God. Wouldn't you think? Imagine being able to somehow appreciate the entire sweep of Creation, in all its infinity and infinite wonder. Imagine being able to sense the swaying movement of trees and grasses, to follow the flight of birds, to sense the prompting of human hearts.

God did not share that power with us. God did, however, give us the capacity for awe. What an extraordinary gift. We not only have a dwelling place, but we can appreciate its beauty. We can bask in its wonder.

What can you give that will stir wonder in someone else?

Prayer:

With each deed of love, O God, may I also renew my neighbor's capacity for wonder. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Wednesday, December 5

Psalm 90:15-16

*Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*

The author of Psalm 90 clearly lived in turbulent times. The song's lament rises to God not just for the poet, but for all the people of the nation; not just for a perilous now, but for "as many years as we have seen evil." May the future, the psalmist begs, be better for us and for our children.

The psalmist sought out the generous heart of God. God, we know, gave generous hearts to each one of us. That means that God's work can be manifest to people in and through us. When we give, God gives. When God gives, we can be God's hands.

Around us there are many people who feel as the psalmist felt, that God has afflicted them. They can tell stories of years of evil.

Let God's work be manifest to them – in us. Let's God's glorious power be manifest to their children – again, in us.

Prayer:

Have compassion on your servants, O God, on us and on anyone who is troubled. Have compassion on your servants, O God, in us and through us. May we make manifest your glorious power to your children. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Thursday, December 6

Malachi 3:5

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

God was not in a good mood while speaking to Malachi, no, not at all. God looked about the nation, and saw it filled with people selling magic (and defrauding them), people breaking their promises, people making promises they didn't intend to keep, people underpaying their workers, and people ignoring the most vulnerable people in the society: widows, orphans, and residents from another land. And God saw that it was not very good.

The prophet became "my messenger" (that's what "malachi" means in Hebrew) to summon the people to do better: speak truth, pay a living wage, care for the poor, and give justice to the stranger. God and Malachi alike intended to give a great gift to the people of Israel: a just, righteous, and joyful community.

How can we give that gift in our own place and time?

Prayer:

O God, as I give this item which will nourish a person, help me to know: What can I give that will nourish a community, a nation, a world? How may I be your messenger? Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Friday, December 7

Malachi 3:14-15

[God said,] "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the LORD of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.'"

Yes, here's the question, isn't it, as relevant to us as it was to those in Malachi's day: When arrogance and evil bring success, why follow the ways of generosity and service? Why be openhearted when selfishness brings so much more?

Malachi's answer – that God will (someday) reward the righteous and punish the unrighteous – both satisfies and disappoints. It's pleasant to think that some day justice will come, but frustrating not to know when that will be. For that matter, it's depressing that it's not *right now*.

Yet it can be right now. We can choose to affirm those who give and critique those who take. We can cease to celebrate power for power's sake, and honor goodness for goodness' sake. That's another gift we can give the world. Wouldn't it be amazing if more and more of us gave it?

Prayer:

Help us give righteousness to the world, O God, by honoring those who follow your ways. Let us celebrate the givers, and emulate the givers, and increase the number of the givers. May it bring your day of righteousness soon! Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Saturday, December 8

Luke 9:3-4

[Jesus] said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money – not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there."

It sounds like an irresponsible way to do ministry, doesn't it? It seems like the unwitting hosts were asked to bear the burden of the apostles' visits. The first missionaries to Hawai'i blithely ignored Jesus' directions, to the extent of packing an entire printing press into the hold of the *Thaddeus* in preparation for the 1820 arrival in the Hawaiian Islands. They also brought bags, money, and plenty of extra tunics.

Jesus knew, however, that with this instruction he gave his disciples the ability to offer two gifts. First, and most obviously, they brought with them the good news of God's grace, and with it the healing power so desperately needed in the villages of Galilee.

And in accepting the hospitality of their hosts, they presented the second offering. "In accepting the gift, you honor the giver," says writer Stephen R. Donaldson. We know the feeling of pleasure that rises from giving. When we let others give to us, the satisfaction goes to them.

Prayer:

O God, let me be as generous in accepting the gifts of others as I am in offering my own to them. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Sunday, December 9

Luke 1:78-79

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Each morning, the dawn from on high breaks upon us. It's a daily miracle comprised of more miracles than one can count: miracles of celestial mechanics, and of the interaction between light and water; miracles of retinal cells sending signals, and of brain cells assembling a picture; miracles of human understand and, for that matter of human life itself.

My Lord, what a morning.

Zechariah, however, dared to hope for a miracle beyond that of dawn itself. He dared to hope for a dawn that would guide fractured, fractious human beings into the ways of peace. He dared to hope for a dawn which would dispel the clouds of fear, domination, and violence.

My Lord, what a morning that would be.

He set his son John, to be known years later as “the Baptist,” on the road to proclaim that message of hope and peace. How can we proclaim and amplify that message in our day?

Prayer:

Send us the dawn, O God. Send us the dawn of peace. Send us as your messengers to proclaim peace. Send us as your laborers to build peace. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 10

Isaiah 40:10-11a

*See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms.*

“Oh, oh. Be careful around Mom. She’s really mad. At you.”

Is there any child who hasn’t heard this warning – if not about Mom, then about some parental figure in their life – at least once? The terrors of parental/grandparental/avuncular wrath usually become the kernel of nostalgic stories, repeated over and over again with longing and affection.

They’re repeated with affection because the surprising (and unsurprising) end of these stories is usually loving and gracious. The wrath of Mother/Father/Grandfather/Aunt turns to warmth and forgiveness. The thunder gives way to sunlight. The child learns something. The child may learn with tears of relief, or of regret, or of apology, but not with tears of suffering.

It’s so common that when it doesn’t happen, we call it child abuse and neglect.

Why can’t we do this in other spheres of life? Why can’t we bring, not our anger, but our affection? Why can’t we feed our flocks like shepherds, and gather lambs in our arms?

Because we can. We can do it. Let’s do it.

Prayer:

Let our gift today be our affection, O God, a love that can dampen our anger, and turn our power to peace. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 11

Isaiah 19:24-25

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

Isaiah must have been shocked. "Egypt my people"? "Assyria the work of my hands"? "Israel my heritage"?

During Isaiah's lifetime, all those nations were, at one time or another, enemies of his own country, Judah. Neighboring Israel invaded Judah, and so did the mighty Assyrian Empire – after conquering Israel completely. Egypt was at times a hovering threat and at others an uncertain ally.

Yet here, God declares that all *four* nations – Egypt, Assyria, Israel, and Isaiah's own Judah – live in God's love and blessing. Enmity overthrown. Hatred discarded. Peace declared.

God's gift to the Chosen People was to choose other people, too.

Prayer:

O God, expand our chosen people. May we see in each stranger your people, your heritage, the work of your hands. Let not our shock impair our love. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Wednesday, December 12

Luke 7:28

[Jesus said,] "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

What is the true worth of any person?

If you go by the resale value of the human body's component elements, it's just a dollar – truly the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. Jesus, however, looked straight at the value of the human soul, and whether one soul was worth more than another.

Yes, indeed, he said, John the Baptist is greater than anyone – except that everyone is greater than he.

In the paradox is the truth: every human being is worth so much to Jesus, and to God, as to make comparison impossible. Which means the greatest gift you can give today is to tell someone just how much they are loved.

Let that join the noodles in your giving bag.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for loving us so greatly. Thank you for telling us so. May we love so well as you. May we start by telling someone else how much they are worth. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Thursday, December 13

2 Corinthians 8:3-4

For, as I can testify, [the church of Macedonia] voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

Begging to give? When was the last time you begged someone to let you give?

It was at a restaurant, wasn't it? When the bill arrived? Did you offer to give according to your means (and your share) or did you urge the others to let you pay the entire tab?

So yes, we know what it is to beg to give.

Today, there's no need to beg. You can do it. The grocery bag awaits.

You privilege of sharing in this ministry is yours.

Prayer:

Let us share in your ministries, O God, with all the saints. Let us have the means, and let us have the drive. We would excel in generous undertakings. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Friday, December 14

2 Corinthians 9:7

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Wait, what? Not only do I have to give (I'm taking those words about compulsion with a grain of salt), I have to do it *cheerfully*?

Right. Like *that's* going to happen.

Well, it might.

Paul's point was not to put some kind of control on your emotions, which rarely works, but to test your feelings as you make decisions about your giving. We usually manage to avoid gifts that are too great, gifts that will strain our ability to survive. Paul urged his readers in Corinth to avoid a gift that was too small, a gift that would make them feel like they had done less than they could, a gift that left them feeling selfish, a gift that told them they did not love.

Give, he told them, until the gift is large enough that it cheers your spirit.

That's what God loves: a cheerful soul.

Prayer:

What will be enough, O God, to brighten my spirit? What shall I share to widen my smile? Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Saturday, December 15

Isaiah 12:3

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

Human living is filled with tiny moments of salvation. Every time we satisfy our hunger pangs with a meal: that is a moment of salvation. Every time we catch our toe but catch ourselves before we fall: that is a moment of salvation. Every time we refresh ourselves with water from the tap: that is a moment of salvation.

There are so many that our brains could not embrace them all.

That gives us the opportunity to be wells of salvation for others. Not the Great Salvation – we can leave that to God – but one or more of those tiny moments of salvation. We can provide the ingredients for that meal. We can clear away the obstacle and prevent the stumble. We can help dig the well that fills the tap.

When we do, there is joy.

Prayer:

May we be sources of tiny salvations, O God, in this bag we fill today, and in the ways we share tomorrow. Bless us that our wells never run dry. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

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