

An Advent of Giving

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

Volume 2: December 16 – 25, 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.

Sunday, December 16

Philippians 4:5

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Strength is a handy thing. It works well in bridges, for example. A roadbed set upon weak supports doesn't do anybody any good.

Strength has its place as well in our life and work. When something has to be done quickly and well, a person of strong will and firm mind (and the proper skill) is the one to call. Hesitation or uncertainty in an emergency can spell disaster.

Truly, though, those needs are rare. Far more often, people crave a light touch, a gentle word, a tender smile. They'll respond to those urgent commands, those strong directions, for certain. Yet we use them far more often than we need to. We use them far more often than we should.

Some people may never show their gentleness at all.

Let no one be in doubt of yours.

Prayer:

Gentle me, O God. Let me be tender with your children. Let me be light, gentle, and kind. Let me be loving as you are loving. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 17

Isaiah 11:6

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,*

*the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

Imagine: a lamb settles down for the night, carefully crushing the grasses to make a comfortable bed. It lies down, then glances up at a sound in the shrubbery. A wolf emerges, its carnivore's teeth gleaming in the starlight.

Then it lies down. And goes to sleep.

Imagine the lamb's surprise that first time. The wolf's behavior breaks all expectations. It's a nice surprise, to be sure, but one that the lamb will puzzle over for years.

What gift can you give that will create that kind of pleasant surprise for someone else? What expectation can you overturn, changing dread into delight? What new way of being with others can you create that will change conflict into peace?

Prayer:

God of the leopard and the kid, help us make a new way for ourselves. Where we have been frightening, let us be welcoming. And where we have been the frightened ones, give us peace. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 18

Isaiah 11:2

*The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

It's just a week away – that deadline for all Christmas gift preparation. You've got just seven days to decide about all those gifts. Choose wisely!

Or... Choose wisdom.

That is, choose to give wisdom to those you love. Some of that wisdom might be knowledge, things you know that somebody else doesn't. Some of that wisdom might be experience, things you have faced that somebody else hasn't. Some of that wisdom might be perspective, something you've seen that somebody else hasn't.

Wisdom doesn't mean that your solution will be better than the one your loved one chooses. But wisdom does mean that nobody should feel like they face a major decision entirely on their own.

You can share your wisdom. You can help them feel supported. Treasured. Valued. Loved.

Give a little wisdom. It's a gift that keeps on giving.

Prayer:

Let your spirit rest upon me, God, the spirit of wisdom and understanding. Help me share your spirit with a tender and loving heart, so that those I love are never wholly alone. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Wednesday, December 19

Luke 7:33-34

[Jesus said,] "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

You just can't satisfy some people. Or at least, you can't satisfy *all* of the people.

And, well, there are some people you can't satisfy at all.

Jesus and John the Baptist preached a similar message in utterly dissimilar ways. John emulated the rough-and-ready wilderness prophet, Elijah, wearing rough clothing and living away from populated areas. Jesus journeyed from house to house, village to village, accepting the hospitality of local leaders and speaking in the synagogues.

John drew a following, but his manners put others off. Some of them, no doubt, appreciated Jesus far more. And then there were those who could not accept either one. It made Jesus shake his head in sorrow.

Are you a John or a Jesus? Most likely, you're neither one: you get to share the good news of God in a way unique to you. There's no need to emulate one or the other. Some will appreciate your message, and some will not.

There's only one you. You might as well give as you give.

Prayer:

No, I cannot preach like Peter, and I cannot pray like Paul: let me share the love of Jesus in my way, the way you gave me, the way I love the best. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Thursday, December 20

Psalm 80:4-5

*O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.*

Honesty. Honestly.

It's well to be honest about our lives. Sometimes the living is easy, and sometimes it is very, very hard. The wealthiest and most powerful among us are acquainted with grief and the bitterness of loss.

Tomorrow is the shortest day of the year, and the longest night. The shades and the shadows echo the ancient psalmist's despair.

It will be tempting to deny the heartache, to hide the pain. Others, watching, may try to do the same. Perhaps we'll be OK. Perhaps they will. But perhaps not.

Honesty in sorrow, in shadow, in loss, is a great gift you can share with someone else. If you do no more than catch their tears on your shoulder – if you do no more than drop your tears upon their shoulder – you have done a great thing. You have made a great gift.

Honesty. Honestly.

Prayer:

Give me the courage to feel what I feel. Give me the generosity to share what I feel. Give me the grace to honestly feel, and honestly share. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Friday, December 21

Isaiah 40:12

*Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.*

Honesty. Honestly.

It applies to more than sorrow. It applies to more than pain.

On this longest night of the year and every other night of the year, it also applies to celebration and to praise. Isaiah dared to sing praise for a deliverance that had not yet come. He didn't even wait for it.

We, therefore, can lift our praise whenever we like, whenever the spirit moves us. We can let our hearts exult in the late sunrise or the early sunset. We can dance in the falling rain. We can twist in the surf like the honu. We can let our spirits soar with the 'io.

From the mountains to the coastlands, from mauka to makai, we can give glory to the LORD.

What a gift to give!

Honesty. Honestly.

Prayer:

Give me the courage to feel what I feel. Give me the generosity to share what I feel. Give me the grace to honestly feel, and honestly share. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Saturday, December 22

Luke 13:31-32

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'"

There are two gifts here, aren't there? First, the gift of care these Pharisees offered Jesus. Concerned for his safety from the king who had executed John the Baptist, they brought a warning. They valued his life. They acted to preserve it.

Is there someone who needs your care and concern today?

Second, the gift Jesus returned to them: the gift of commitment. He would not let danger dissuade him from his work, his ministry, his giving. "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow," he said. Not even a king would prevent him.

Indeed, Jesus made death itself a part of his work. No king would prevent that, either.

Who needs your firmness of commitment today?

Prayer:

O God, let me bring my care and concern to those at risk. Let them never face danger, illness, or sorrow without me. Let no threats prevent me from loving. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Sunday, December 23

Luke 1:43-45

[Elizabeth said,] "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Both women – Elizabeth and Mary – heard unexpected news. Elizabeth, whose wish for a child had gone frustrated for many years, conceived beyond expectation or hope. Her husband, Zechariah, found himself struck speechless for months because he had *not* believed in the promised miracle. The women, in contrast, welcomed each other's news with joy.

Separately, the two women had given God the gift of faith. Together, they confirmed it by giving one another the gift of friendship. Elizabeth no doubt found Mary's support a great relief as she experienced pregnancy, and then parenthood, for the first time. Mary, carrying a child while unmarried, found affirmation and confirmation in Elizabeth's joyful greeting.

They were present for each other. They cared for each other. They loved each other.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, we ask: is there any greater gift?

Prayer:

O God, may we be Elizabeth, to give a joyful welcome to those expecting suspicion and rejection. O God, may we be Mary, to care for and comfort those facing new challenges. O God, may we be present to those we wish to love. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 24

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:10-12

But the angel said to [the shepherds], “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Tonight we recall the angels’ visit to those startled shepherds, whose first (and highly rational) reaction to the appearance of heavenly beings was fear and terror. “Do not be afraid: I am bringing you good news,” they heard. Somehow, that message broke through. They found comfort. They found reassurance. They found joy.

On this holy night, remember this: the greatest gift you can give to anyone is that gift of good news, of comfort, of reassurance. This is the news that inspires our hope, our peace, our joy, our love. This is the gift that embraces the entire world.

Prayer:

We thank you, O God, for the gift of Jesus. We thank you for the promise in the child, and for the teaching of the adult, for the self-offering of the Savior, and for the triumph of the resurrected Christ. May we share this good news freely and compassionately, inviting all people to find their hope, their peace, their joy, and their love in you. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 25

Christmas Day

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

The gifts will be passed about today. The wrapping paper may fly (and will probably miss the intended basket), and so may a new toy or two (intentionally or otherwise). The tables may not groan with the weight of Christmas dinners, but those who eat them may groan subtly after consuming nearly everything in sight.

On this day, let yourself accept these gifts, and more. Accept the gifts which come in wrapping paper. Accept the gifts upon the table. Accept the gifts of warm embraces, laughing eyes, or singing voices. Accept the gifts of human love.

Accept as well the gifts of living: the beauty of the world, the music of its sounds, the scents of daily life. Accept the gifts of remembering these things and more.

Accept as well the gifts of divine love, which took human form full of grace and truth. Accept as well the gifts of understanding and compassion. Accept the gifts of forgiveness and inspiration.

Tomorrow there will be time for you to give again. Today: rejoice in what you've been given by God and the people around you. Rejoice!

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the richness of your love you share so freely. Thank you for your living Word among us. Thank you for your gifts. Amen.