



An Advent of Giving

Readings and Reflections for the Advent
Season 2019 based on the
Revised Common Lectionary Daily
Readings

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An Advent of Giving

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 each 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.

Advent 2019

An ancient vision newly understood.
A mother's vision of a righteous world.
A clarion summons, so harshly declaimed.
A child born to promise beyond hope.

Let Advent come in spirits filled with light.
Let Advent come to fill the cupboards bare.
Let Advent come to give the weary hope.
Let Advent come with love and peace and joy.

Sunday, December 8

Matthew 3:8

[John the Baptist said,] "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

We pack a great deal into these four weeks of Advent: the stories of a world preparing for its Savior, the stories of a family preparing for a Holy Child, the stories of a Creation preparing for its Savior's return, and the stories of a prophet, John the Baptist, preparing for the advent of the Messiah. He brings a harsh and strident voice to this preparatory season.

We dare not do without the Baptist, however. He reminds us that preparation is not always fun. It's not all about decorations and gifts and the cookie baking we enjoy. It's also about mending and cleaning and saving and doing the things we'd rather not do, but things wouldn't be "right" without them.

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance," rumbles John across the centuries. Do the things that change your direction. Do the things that bring you closer to God. Do the things that let you follow the coming-and-already-here Jesus more closely.

Bear fruit.

Prayer:

What must I do, O God, to bear sweet and nourishing fruit for my family, my neighbors, and the world? Give me guidance so that I do it. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Sunday, December 1

Psalm 122:8

*For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say,
"Peace be within you."*

I am old enough that I still think of emails rather like I think of letters – there's supposed to be a closing wish followed by my name. When I write these messages, I'm likely to close with one of two single words: "Blessings" or "Peace." In this Advent of Giving, I can't help reflect that hunger is one of the harshest enemies of humanity – indeed, of every species. Can anyone have peace of mind with an empty belly? Can anyone have peace of the soul while their bodies cry out for nourishment?

Let us assure our neighbors that we mean it when we wish them peace, by bringing peace to hunger.

Prayer:

O God, we hunger for peace. Let me also bring peace to those who hunger. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 2

Genesis 8:12

Then [Noah] waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

Noah made four tests to see if the world had dried out enough to leave the ark after it grounded and ceased to float free. He sent a raven that flew to and fro but did not find dry ground. He sent the dove once: it returned without

a sign. He sent the dove a second time, and it returned with an olive leaf. He sent the dove a third time, and it did not return at all.

So often, that is how we know our friends' or neighbors' need is over: they don't return to us any more with their sighs, tears, and requests. Once we knew everything about their hardships; suddenly we hear no more. We fear it might be because things have gotten worse.

We hope and pray it's because, like the dove, they have found dry and stable ground to make a home.

Prayer:

We do not know where the dove flies, O God. We do not know where it settles in safety. May all the doves of our lives find rest and safety from their struggles at their lengthy journeys' ends. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 3

Genesis 9:14-15

[God said to Noah,] "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh."

We forget how old the stories of our Bible are. They are *old* – this story may have been first written down over three thousand years ago, and have been told and re-told for generations before that.

That's a long time.

Saturday, December 7

Isaiah 40:4

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

But I *like* mountains.

Looking up to a mountain deepens my sense of the grandeur of Creation and the glory of God. Looking down from a mountain raises my sense of the variety of life and the infinity of beauty.

Valleys and mountains, however, are significant obstacles in the way of a traveler. Not too long ago I found myself toiling up and down steep and slippery banks on a sparsely marked trail. I was ready to raise some valleys and level some mountains then!

Our needs and struggles change our perceptions, not just of our own lives, but of what God's grace will look like. I dare not despise the person for whom Divine love looks like breakfast any more than I dare despise Isaiah who would pave over the wilderness to see his people come home.

Prayer:

What is the height and depth of your grace to my neighbor, O God? Is it a kind word, a sound roof, a purpose, a meal? For that matter, what is the height and depth of your grace to myself, O God? Today? Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

you,” assures Isaiah. Another of Scripture’s major themes, however, is the *unresponsiveness* of God, and here they are side by side. “Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction...”

What are we to make of this?

We can expect God to feel distant, and to feel close by, as we go through our lives. Sometimes, I’m sure that the distance we feel is something we create. “I can’t bear you to see me,” we tell God. “Don’t look!”

Sometimes, I’m sure that the distance is because God has drawn away from our perceptions. Why? It’s hard to say. Perhaps it’s so that we can learn. Perhaps it’s so that we can fulfill a commission. Perhaps it’s because we don’t need that closeness in that time.

Perhaps we’ll never entirely know. Isaiah’s word promises that God never leaves us utterly alone, that God never steps away forever. We shall be accompanied. We shall be embraced. We shall be answered.

Prayer:

Answer me when I cry, O God, even if – especially if – I have chosen not to listen for you. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

That’s a long time for human beings to be convinced that there is a god, that there is a God, who is both great and loving. That’s a long time for human beings to pass down the word that God care about the welfare of the world. That’s a long time for human beings to be assured that whatever else might befall us, we will not suffer at the whims of an unreliable God.

What a treasure to be assured of the love of God.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the beauty of the rainbow, all the range of color in the sky. Thank you God, for the beauty of your assurance, all the range of love in our hearts. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Wednesday, December 4

Isaiah 54:10

*For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*

The ears of those who first heard these words burned with humiliation, fear, and despair. They were the exiles of Judah, people who had departed from their mountains and been removed by force from their beloved hills. They did not question God’s abandonment. They *knew* for a certainty that God had turned away.

I wonder how they greeted Isaiah’s assurances. I suspect more than a few replied with some variant of, “Oh, yeah?”

Says you!" What else could they say? What else could they believe in the midst of their suffering, uncertainty, and pain?

Somebody believed, however. Somebody believed, because they held on to these words. Somebody believed, because they were preserved and handed down. Somebody believed for all those other unable-to-believe people, so that when God's compassion became evident in their lives, they could know it had been there all along.

Not everyone can believe for themselves all the time. Who can you believe for today?

Prayer:

I believe in your steadfast love, O God. For all those who ache for it and dare not believe it, I believe in your steadfast love. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Thursday, December 5

Psalm 72:4

*May [the king] defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

The Psalmists had an interesting notion of the role of royalty. The king's job, it seems, was to do more than lead armies, create laws, and judge disputes. The king's job was also to defend the least powerful people of the realm from the more powerful.

I'm sure you can see the contradiction. Does it really work to grant one person a great amount of power in order to

restrain others from abusing theirs? Doesn't it really lead to that one person overstepping their authority over everybody?

The answer, says history, is: No, it usually doesn't; and yes, it usually does.

The great experiment of a republic is to appoint the people as their own defenders, to give the needy the power of their own deliverance, to appoint to all the responsibility for restraining the oppressors. It falls to us to see that the poor need not remain poor, to see that the needy have an opportunity to thrive, to see that the greedy stand accountable. It starts with one-on-one support and kindness. It leads to the ballot box and the halls of power.

Prayer:

We have a commission to rule, O God, and a commission to rule on behalf of the most vulnerable of the nations. Give us the wisdom to use our power well. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Friday, December 6

Isaiah 30:19

Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.

One of the major themes of the Scriptures is the responsiveness of God. "When he hears it, he will answer