



An Advent of Giving

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

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Your Personal Reflections

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.

Your Personal Reflections

Monday, December 16

Isaiah 29:18-19

On that day the deaf shall hear

the words of a scroll,

and out of their gloom and darkness

the eyes of the blind shall see.

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,

and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

Why should the deaf need to *hear* the words of a scroll? The written word works perfectly well for someone who can not hear. Did anyone actually ask a blind person if they were living in gloom and darkness? There is no inevitable connection between eyesight and happiness. Meekness, likewise, does not prevent joy. Need does not rule out exultation.

We human beings, however, act as if it were so: as if the deaf require hearing, and the blind require sight, and the humble require energizing, and the poor require new reason to give thanks. In my experience, what these groups have in common is the need for the rest of us to remove obstacles to these things. Information presented only in speech hinders those who cannot hear. Information presented only in pictures hinders those who cannot see. The assumption that the quiet have no joy hinders their celebration; the celebration of wealth discourages the thanksgivings of the poor.

If we could, if we would tear down these barriers to learning and to rejoicing, then Isaiah's dream would come true.

Prayer:

Help us to comprehend the ways we obstruct others from learning, sharing, and growing, O God. Help us learn, and help us tear those obstacles away. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Tuesday, December 17

Psalm 42:1-3

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

*My tears have been my food
day and night,*

*while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

"Where is your God?"

The ancient poet may well have asked the question this way: "Where is my God?" The mood of Psalm 42 is somber. The writer clearly suffers. God's help, God's presence, God's salvation lie in the future. Tears stream in the present.

The psalm offers an antidote to the enforced gaiety of an American holiday season. Though it's rarely said out loud, we all know that we're supposed to feel happy at this time. "You'd better not pout; you'd better not cry," says the song, and we all know why: because our culture's Christmas demands a smile, a laugh, and a light spirit. If we don't feel that way, we lie.

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.

Wednesday, December 25

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.

The ancient writer knew better. "My soul longs for you, O God," was the prayer. The ancient editors of the Book of Psalms knew better. "My soul thirsts for God," it said, and they included it. In truth, life can be hard, sad, painful, and tragic. We know what it means to feed ourselves on our own tears.

It is the honesty that forms the core of this psalm. Sad? Suffering? Let that be your prayer. Happy? Exultant? Let that be your prayer.

Don't let anybody tell you how you feel. Don't try bringing those "manufactured" feelings to God, either. After all, God knows your feelings already. Why lie?

Prayer:

Here is my honesty, O God. Here is what my life is like in this moment. Here are my feelings. Here are my needs. I hope in you. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Wednesday, December 18

Zechariah 8:16-17

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.

There are a few places in the Scriptures when the ancient writers made things plain and simple. "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)? "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all

your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18). The last one would be quoted by Jesus (and therefore by Mathew, Mark, and Luke), Paul, and James.

This section of Zechariah offers yet another of these plain summaries. Tell the truth. Seek truth and peace in making decisions. Do not seek another's harm. Do not promise what you will not deliver.

Simple, right?

Simple to comprehend, yes. Simple to do: Apparently not.

Prayer:

I would not disappoint you, O God. May I embrace truth, nurture peace, resist evil, and keep my word. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Thursday, December 19

Galatians 3:28-29

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The early Christian Church had a problem. Launched as a movement within Judaism, it found itself attracting the interest – positive interest – of non-Jews ("Greeks," in Paul's words above). For as many reasons, possibly, as Gentiles who sought to learn more about the new faith, the good news of Jesus came as Good News to a surprising number of people.

Not just non-Jews, either. Free citizens considered the Way of Jesus, and so did those who were enslaved. Men sought

Tuesday, December 24

Titus 2:11

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

It's probably a basic human impulse to look for great things in great events. Astrologers have turned to the vaults of heaven to bring meaning to the present and to find signs of the future. Our histories contain account after account of populous nations, sizable marches, and substantial armies. We identify ideas with the great speakers who espoused them. We understand beauty through the artists who depicted it.

There is much that is true to this. Leaders make a difference. Large groups of people make a difference. Art and artists make a difference. But.

So do small events, unnoticed at the time: a child born in a family unremarked by all save their friends. A child born absent those friends because of an inconvenient trip. A child born and hastily cradled in an animal's feeding bin, because it was the best thing at hand. What difference could such an event make? What impact could it have in the world?

Not much, says, Titus, just... the salvation of the world.

Small things make a difference.

Prayer:

Give us the grace to receive your love in the small things, O God. Give us the grace to appreciate the gift of Bethlehem's child. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

to carry Christ in our hearts. Mary and Joseph carried the infant Jesus in their arms. We are called to do the work of Christ with our arms. Mary and Joseph sent the adult Jesus into the world. We are called to represent Christ throughout the world.

Was that part of your plans?

If not, well – it's time to adjust your plans.

Prayer:

May I carry you, Christ, as faithfully and diligently as Mary and Joseph – even if that isn't what I planned. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Monday, December 23

2 Samuel 7:18

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?"

That is a *very* good question. Who am I? What is my family? What is my nation? What about any of us prompts God to love us so much?

The answer is simple: We are creation. We are human. We are.

That's why God loves us.

That's why God loves us so much.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for loving us so much. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

to learn more about Christ, and so did women.

Greeks! Slaves! Women! Who knew what to do with such people?

Paul knew. He didn't always do it successfully, but he knew: What you do with such people is welcome them fully, include them fully, embrace them fully in the life of Christ's Church. Each and every one is an heir according to the promise, another full participant in the community of God.

All of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Prayer:

You made us one in Christ, O God, when we saw barriers to divide. May we value one another as you value us all. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Friday, December 20

Psalms 80:17-18

*But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.*

Then we will never turn back from you;

give us life, and we will call on your name.

That's quite a bargain, isn't it? "Give us life, and we will call on your name," the psalmist Asaph said to God. As is not unusual for people throughout the centuries, the poet offered God a bargain. Give me the thing I need most and crave most – life – and I will give you... What? What did Asaph offer?

Psalms 80 is not a song of thanksgiving. It's an urgent prayer for help, apparently because of a national emergency. It's

an urgent prayer that calls over and over again on... God's name.

Essentially, if God saved the nation from its dangers, Asaph offered to call upon God the next time it faced danger.

That's quite a bargain – for us. It's the bargain that God keeps offering to us. Rely on me, says God, and I will be the One you can rely on. Rely on me, says God, and you will be safe, and whole, and loved.

That's quite a bargain.

Prayer:

In my sorrows and stresses, O God, I call upon your name. Hear my cries as faith, and come with your salvation.

Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Saturday, December 21

John 3:31

[Jesus said,] "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all."

I am well practiced at speaking about earthly things. I can think about politics, about personal relationships, about the weather, and, of course, about birds. I can spend a full day considering a mechanical system or a social system, or even longer. I can wrestle with misbehaving computers and I can combine ingredients with heat and time and make a meal. And I can talk about it all.

Yes, I'm well practiced at speaking about earthly things.

Even with years in the ministry, I'm less practiced at

speaking about heavenly things. I'm less practiced at plumbing the depths of Divine love and grace, less practiced at exploring the relationship God wants to have with me. I'm less practiced at emptying myself of cares or distractions, and letting God's Spirit fill me.

Well, that's why we practice such things, isn't it? To get better.

Prayer:

Here I am, O God, practicing. Fill me, I pray. Amen.

Now pray with a gift of food.

Sunday, December 22

Matthew 1:18

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Life, as the saying goes, is what happens when you're making other plans.

Joseph and Mary had plans. Get married. Make a home. Have children. Do their work. Worship God. Watch the children make homes and have children. Love the grandchildren. Hold hands together while facing the twilight of their lives.

Some of that happened. So much more happened that they hadn't planned for – not planned for at all.

Strangely enough, we share with Mary and Joseph that summons to step beyond our own plans. God has called each of us to be Christ-bearers – not as parents, but as messengers. Mary carried Jesus in her womb. We are called