

DAYbreaks

Daily Reflections for
Advent and Christmas



Introduction

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for a reason.
Because
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of this—the
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God reveals.**

A pregnant woman stands in the grocery-store line. She waits at the bus stops, sits on the train, kneels before a bank of flickering candles. Who is she?

A baby dozes in our arms, blinks at us from over his parent's shoulder, reaches out for a stuffed rabbit. The baby's doughy, healthy face breaks into a grin. Who is he?

A man holding a sign crouches at the intersection. A voice shouts about sin over the AM radio as we speed through the countryside. Subway passengers stare at the floor as the warning to repent echoes from a corner of the train. They don't react. They're used to it. What is he saying?

The brightest star pulls our gaze upward on a still, deep night. Winds chill, thunder shakes us, the sea churns and it seems it may never stop. Why?

In the midst of all this, here I am. Encounters, moments, losses, and as it all happens, it's clear that I have a choice regarding the life and movement surrounding me. How do I respond to all of what I see and hear, to the people I meet on this journey?

I could face all of it confident in my perspective, my angle, my take, holding tight to my chosen narrative, my history, and what I believe, deep down, is my fate...or I could listen.

There is a story of a Zen teacher, approached by a purportedly eager student. The teacher answered the student's query by pouring tea into a cup. He poured and continued to pour until the cup was overflowing and the student protested that it was too full to hold another drop. So

it was with the student's own spirit. How could he ever hope to learn if he thought he was already full enough? What was left for anything new?

I often think of this story around Advent and Christmas. John the Baptist, Mary, angels, Holy Infant, Bethlehem. Sure. Got it. Tell me something I don't already know.

All right. Here's what I don't know.

When I look at the face of that dozing child, even if he is part of my own family, I don't know who he will become. I will only discover who he is by watching and listening; really and truly listening with intention, openness, and respect.

I can observe the pregnant woman, the prophet, the natural signs, the pilgrims on their way, and I can impose a narrative on them all, tell them whom I think they are, what they are all about, and what they are surely saying. I would walk away from it all, having never really encountered any of them, content perhaps, but certainly unchallenged and unchanged.

We call God's action in the world "revelation" for a reason. Because through all of this—the woman, the prophet, the messengers, the natural signs and wonders, and the pilgrims' stories—God reveals.

If I approach them all with narratives already composed,

...how will I hear?

...how will I see?

...how can I encounter in truth and love?

Advent. Christmas. John the Baptist. Isaiah. Madonna and Child. Bethlehem. I've heard it all before.

But have I?

Daily Prayer

*Loving God,
May my heart be
open to your word;
may my mind
be open to your
wisdom; may my life
be open to the deep,
rich presence of that
word made flesh
today and always.
Amen.*



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First Sunday of Advent



It is grand.
Deep, richly
colored folds
carved in
the earth....
Ancient, yet
revealing
something new
in every niche,
every glance.

It was late May, but small piles of snow still dotted the roadside on the way to the Grand Canyon. My Alabama-dwelling sons were delighted.

We'd been out west for a few days, thrilled by the varied landscapes we'd encountered in Nevada and southern Utah. Those hoodoos and fascinating red hills, dunes, and cliff sides were quite a change from our usual view of pine woods, forested mountains, and farm fields east of the Mississippi and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

And now...the actual Grand Canyon lay ahead of us.

I must admit, though, that I had been nurturing a few doubts. Could it really live up to the hype, to that name: "Grand?" I'd read dismissive comments from some tourists who'd popped to the rim, seen what they described as not much more than a big hole in the ground and that photographs get the point across just fine without the hassle of travel: Big Hole. In the ground.

As we drew closer, about ten miles from the rim, mist and fog grew denser, and so did other questions. With this weather, would we see anything at all? Would any of it be worth seeing? What was this journey for, anyway?

The fog continued to float heavily around us as we parked, checked into the cabin, and finally, after many hours on the road, made our way to the viewpoint outside the North Rim Lodge.

Well. It *is* grand. Deep, richly colored folds carved in the earth, even more dramatic through that now-rising mist.

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Ancient, yet revealing something new in every niche, every glance. This landmark, an iconic part of my consciousness my entire life, was a place I looked forward to seeing, but deep down doubted could be anything more revealing in person than it was in those already familiar images.

As I begin this Advent season, I may feel that these Madonnas, these Nativity scenes, these carols are just too familiar. I know what to expect and I may even dread the season if I can't see through the fog of weeks of activity, obligation, or even loneliness.

But I won't do it. I won't stop at the image. I'll keep driving. Real love, ever old and ever new, calls me through the mist, by name.

*And the Word
became flesh and
made his dwelling
among us, and we
saw his glory.*

John 1:14



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Monday



*The centurion
said in reply,
"Lord, I am not
worthy to have
you enter under
my roof; only say
the word and my
servant will be
healed."*

Matthew 8:8

My son and I sat in the den one spring morning, reading and talking, when we heard a rustling sound. Both the front and back doors were open to allow fresh air to flow through, so I assumed the unfamiliar sound was coming from outside. Branches?

The rustling continued, and it became clear a living thing was making it. The sound was intermittent but definitely urgent and perhaps even inside the house. A flapping. Like...a bird?

We peered into the front room and saw that's exactly what it was. A small bird had flown or hopped in the front door and was now on the sill, flinging itself against the large window, fruitlessly beating its wings.

From the creature's view, the way to the limitless sky was clear. But what was this barrier? He could see where he wanted to go. What was keeping him from reaching his home?

Through the Advent Scriptures, God reveals hope to me. The prophets point to peace, Mary's fiat reveals the fruit of trust. In a Child named Emmanuel, God's boundless love shows me where love dwells—here among us.

I can see it. I can hear the promise of that home for which I was so lovingly and intentionally created. It's time to take stock of my own shortsightedness and let the Lord lower the barriers I've constructed and lead me there, to him.

Tuesday

A couple of houses ago, I lived in a midcentury home in a Midwestern town. The house wasn't fancy, but it was roomy and had obviously been custom-built. That odd cabinet in the front bedroom, the seemingly random round mosaic medallion inside another cabinet...what were they about? It was all intriguing and fun, but I figured I'd never know.

Then one day, a man in his sixties came to the door.

"My father built this house," he told me, "and I grew up here. Would you mind if I looked around?"

One by one, the mysteries were solved. His father had been a musician and an audiophile, hence the interesting cabinets that were all built for specific pieces of sound equipment, speakers, and record storage. The mosaic medallion had replaced a round speaker case.

And, he added as he left, pointing to a window ledge in the dining room, "My mother always kept an African violet right in that spot."

My faith home is not austere, plain, or dry. Where I live is sprawling, quirky, and custom-built over the centuries, filled with treasures old and new, waiting to be discovered. Ancient hymns beg the Messiah to arrive. Art and devotions, the fruit of centuries of fellow pilgrims use God's gifts to express hope in beautiful and evocative ways, preparing for that promised banquet.

This is where I live, gratefully.

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*On this mountain
the LORD of hosts
will provide for all
peoples a feast
of rich food and
choice wines, juicy,
rich food and pure,
choice wines.*

Isaiah 25:6



Wednesday



*But when these
signs begin to
happen, stand
erect and raise
your heads
because your
redemption is
at hand.*

Luke 21:28

In parts of the world where there is such a thing as seasons, we are well in the midst of the season of rather dramatic change.

What was green is now brown, much of what was living is now dead, and there is nothing left to do with it all but break it down, rake it up, bag or burn it—to destroy it.

But before that, if there are children, perhaps there is something else to do with the dry piles that make us weary, signs of a sort of end times. If there are children, perhaps there is time to play.

Children see the dead leaves, not as wearisome signs of death and labor, but as a chance to engage with the moment and live more fully. And they leap.

Jesus, and before him, the prophets, speak of end times. We hear those words often at this time of year. Those words can give us pause as we contemplate signs in our own lives or out in the greater world. They can even make us fearful and fill us with dread.

But Jesus points to another way for those who believe, for those who have witnessed his first coming and look forward to his return. In the midst of dryness and signs of an ending, the Living Word enters, asking us to see beyond the early darkness, to trust in him—and leap.

Thursday

Following printed directions to put things together is hard for me. I must have some sort of deficiency in spatial perception because it's something I really have to concentrate on, whether it was learning to sew decades ago to the present moment of puzzling over a sheet of paper with pictures and arrows (never any words), some pieces of wood, and a few screws.

To get from the ideal to the real challenges me.

This Advent narrative I'm living now moves me so. I know that all I need to live, to live well and to—I pray—live forever is to encounter the mystery and profundity of God's love as he, the Lord of the universe, enters into our world.

But then there's reality. A child complains. The job frustrates. The body aches and fails. The friend betrays. The loss echoes. The suffering cry from around the globe, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick, and homeless.

How do I get from the ideal to the real? What exactly am I supposed to be building?

The saints help me understand how to move the gospel from inside to outside, and the saints of Advent especially so: in Elizabeth's welcoming, Joseph's openness, the courage and global vision of Francis Xavier, the generosity of Nicholas, the receptivity of Juan Diego, and the persistent hope of John of the Cross.

In their witness, I see what Emmanuel looks like.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.

Isaiah 7:14



Friday



*Strengthen hands
that are feeble,...
Say to the fearful
of heart: Be
strong, do not
fear! Here is your
God...he comes
to save you.*

Isaiah 35:3, 4

This season of Advent, this run-up to Christmas, does not, I admit, always overwhelm me with fuzzy, happy memories. During my childhood, these weeks were invariably a time of high tension and discord at home.

A parent wistful, yearning, even aching for a lost, idealized childhood. Anger that those times were gone, anger that none of the rest of us could live up to those memories and idealized past. Another parent trying to respond but not helping at all because of his or her own weaknesses.

These details may be specific to me, but many feel a similar sort of ambiguity about these Advent weeks for their own particular reasons.

It would be ironic for me to let this season be defined by regret over another person's refusal or inability to let go of the past. Very, very ironic.

As I continue through these weeks of prayer and preparation, I regularly hear reminders to focus on the "true meaning" of the season and not be distracted by the noisy externals.

But what about internals?

God took on flesh, not in another world but in this world—my world. A world of lost opportunities, mistakes, and regrets rooted, at times, in what we experienced as children.

Now we are called by a different sort of childhood. Another child in the flesh and fully alive, not just in a regrettable past but in a joyous present of reconciling peace, strong and without fear.

Saturday

About a week into a recent trip across the country, I woke up feeling unattached from my home. It's not that home was so unpleasant I didn't want to return, broken air conditioner notwithstanding, but I wasn't especially missing it, either.

It was as if the experiences we'd been having were so interesting they dominated my consciousness until nothing but the present existed. I hadn't actually thought about my house for a couple of days.

Then that Sunday morning, I awoke and almost "remembered" home, but in a disengaged way, like I'd read about it or seen it in a movie.

A couple of hours later, I sat in a Catholic church with my traveling companions, my sons. Mass was about to begin. There we were.

Home.

We settled in, and I felt deeply at home in this place, more connected than I was to my books and furniture hundreds of miles away. My sense of being gracefully bonded to these brothers and sisters, and those around the world, deepened that morning as we listened, as we ate, and as we drank. The Word made flesh had entered, gathered us, and with him and each other, we were home.

Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied.

Matthew 15:36, 37

