

# DAYbreaks

Daily Reflections for Advent  
and Christmas

Liguori Publications © 2014 All rights reserved. • [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org) • 800-325-9521

JAMES S. TORRENS, SJ



# Daily Prayer

Liguori Publications © 2014. All rights reserved. • Liguori.org • 800-325-9521

In this precious season of your coming,  
dear Jesus, help me to be attentive,  
self-effacing, and joy-filled.  
May my heart, today and tomorrow,  
be the place of your coming.



## Introduction

Liguori Publications © 2014 All rights reserved. • Liguori.org • 800-325-9521

**A**dvent and Christmas is the time of year every Christian looks forward to. It is a season apt for contemplation, with the expectancy of Mary and the birth of our Savior at the center of our prayerful regard.

These pages, one each day, are short meditations intended to feed your prayer. The ingredients include a short quote from Scripture, a few paragraphs elaborating on ways to apply it, and finally a nutshell theme of the day. May our Lord Jesus, with the grace of his Incarnation, accompany you along this contemplative way.



**Acknowledgments:** Four of the meditations are modified from my book *A Few Minutes Before God: Prayer for Sundays, Feasts, and Seasons* (Paulist Press, 1995), with the permission of Paulist Press.

Quote from Dante Alighieri from my book *Presenting Paradise: Dante's Paradise: Translation and Commentary* (University of Scranton Press). Copyright ©1993 by Associated University Presses, Inc.

The prophets announce  
a day of darkness  
for the enemies  
of God.

Liguori Publications © 2014 All rights reserved. • [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org) • 800-325-9521

# The Great Day

*At an hour you do not expect,  
the Son of Man will come.*

MATTHEW 24:44

When I was young and before the Second Vatican Council, the Sunday at the end of the Church year and the first Sunday of Advent used to unsettle me. The Gospel readings were about the great day of Judgment, a day to be sprung like a trap on the unwary. The Scriptures forecast the end of the world—a time of earthquakes, plagues, and famine, when nation will rise against nation, and the cosmos itself will break up.

The more lightsome feast of Christ the King now separates these two Sundays. Still, the first Sunday of Advent has kept the prophetic frown of Isaiah, Amos, and Zephaniah, who announced as imminent the day of the Lord's wrath. It is to be a day of darkness for enemies of God, "a day of panic, rout and confusion" for a faithless Jerusalem (Isaiah 22:5). When Jesus came, he did not alter this warning. Wake up, he said, stay on watch, lest God's coming in judgment catch you off guard.

Thank goodness, those denunciatory prophets always made clear that the Lord's final word was *hope*. The psalmist put it well: "If you, Lord, keep account of sins, Lord, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness and so you are revered" (130:3–4).

Upon entering Advent, all too aware of what Malachi called "the great and terrible day" ahead (3:23), what we need right now is God's coming first in mercy! The Church leads us to beseech it with this outcry of Isaiah: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (63:19).

# The Fullness of Time

*From his fullness we have all received,  
grace in place of grace.*

JOHN 1:16

In my years at a retreat center in Los Angeles, I objected only once to a decision by the director—to replace a flowering tree called *pleroma*. My parents loved the vivid purple blooms of their *pleroma*, but my affection was also theological. “*Pleroma*” in Greek means “fullness.” My seminary professor pointed to Colossians, affirming that in Christ “dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily” (2:9), and to Ephesians, describing the Church, “which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (1:23).

We need the richness of the term *pleroma* to hear what Saint Paul wants to say about Christ’s Nativity: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Galatians 4:4–5). What a pressure pack of doctrine!

So what is this mysterious “fullness of time”? The phrase suggests the date a parent fixes for a son to come into his majority, his rights. Paul is highlighting the moment of the clock’s striking for God to bring the people out of long adolescence into maturity.

The Jews were all too aware of their history of missteps and dashed hopes. But John the Baptist had set anticipation of the Messiah stirring in Jewish circles. From prison he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?” (Luke 7:19). We know the answer: Heads up! The fullness of time has come.



The clock is striking  
for God to bring us to maturity.

## Seasoned Greetings

*Give my greetings to every holy one in Christ Jesus.*

PHILIPPIANS 4:21

For almost fifty years I have produced a Christmas card with a poem of my own and an illustration by some artist friend. I have been blessed by these artists, in particular Stella Pilgrim, my collaborator for the last thirty years. This impulse for Christmas poetry dates back to my youth. What a volume of verse I have inflicted on family and friends! (And what an expense the printing comes to, so I skimp on presents!)

This enterprise, I must admit, has given me strong notions about Christmas correspondence. A high value should be set on the missives that go back and forth at that time, especially the family newsletter. Some recipients dread those letters, but I don't.

More to the point, all letters, cards, and photos of the family plus Fido should be framed somehow within the big picture of Christ's Nativity. My heart always sinks at the card with a sleigh scene, the message "Season's Greetings," and just a printed signature. These are not the ones I display on my dresser top. A personal message will placate me, though I will still mumble, "So what's the season?"

The birth of our Savior is, after all, what gave rise in the first place to joyful communiqués among the faithful. Shouldn't our cards and letters in the Advent time be seasoned with joy in the Incarnation?



Let our cards and letters be seasoned  
with joy in the Incarnation.

# The Divine Comedown

*Humbly regard others as  
more important than yourselves.*

PHILIPPIANS 2:3

Saint Paul, in the second chapter of the letter to his beloved Philippians, lists the gifts he sees: the encouragement of faith in Christ, a divine love to hearten them, a full partaking of the Holy Spirit, compassion, and mercy. Now, he says, make me really happy by “being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (2:2).

What does this come down to? Paul tells the Philippians to resist self-importance. Be done with pettiness, “each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others” (2:4). How opposite this seems to normal human drives. How can one possibly live that way? By entering into Christ, Paul tells us, taking on his attitude. And that leads Paul to the great hymn to the Incarnation.

Christ Jesus, since he shared the essence of God, did not regard it presumptuous to be equal with God, but “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (2:7). “Taking the form” means not just the external appearance. He took on the reality. He divested himself.

“He emptied himself.” As we kneel before the crib, how can we even begin to plumb that phrase? It speaks of self-effacement to an extreme we cannot even imagine. And why did the Son of God do that? For me. For us. By all rights, therefore, Saint Paul, admiring this comedown of God, urges us to take on that attitude as our own. It is the essential feature of being “in Christ.”



Paul tells the Philippians  
to resist self-importance.

# Annunciation

*Do not be afraid, Mary,  
for you have found favor with God.*

LUKE 1:30

“Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). This Annunciation scene is the most familiar passage of our Gospels. We repeat it on most of the feasts of Mary. Christian artists have paid it as much attention, almost, as the Nativity. How much it tells us about the coming of God into our midst, a hidden creature in the womb, a frail blessing.

We recall Saint Luke’s account of the Annunciation every time we say the “Hail Mary”—fifty-three times with each rosary, as though we can’t tire of making Gabriel’s greeting our own. Isaiah, looking ahead, saw Mary in dim but unmistakable outline, maiden and mother, full of nobility and blessing.

From the shining messenger, Mary learned God’s wish and thrilling plan. Mary’s part in it was so mysterious and overwhelming, it would reduce any of us to panic and trembling. To have so much laid upon us! To have so much dependent on us! But the angel said, as God always does for every calling and mission, “Fear not.”

In responding, did Mary have a quaver in her voice, as we sometimes do upon taking vows, making promises, conscious of something momentous and how frail we are before it? Probably not. Mary was so simple and pure of heart. Her response to the angel delivers her full confidence in God, her humble sense of self: “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).



**We recall Saint Luke’s account  
each time we say the Hail Mary.**

## A Spirited Event

*The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything.*

JOHN 14:26

A descriptive phrase for kings in the Old Testament is “the Lord’s anointed.” We apply it above all to the Messiah. The anointing of Jesus is effected by the Spirit of God energizing him for his mission.

We profess in the Apostles’ Creed that Jesus Christ “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” In the Annunciation according to Saint Luke, Mary expresses puzzlement: *How can she have a child without sexual intimacy?* The angel explains: “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35).

Liguori Publications © 2014 All rights reserved. • Liguori.org • 800-325-9521

“Spirit,” meaning “breath,” is always a source of unseen movement. In creation, the Spirit of God moves over the waters, bringing form and life. In the re-creation of the world through Jesus Christ, this loving Spirit of the Most High conveys the Son to the womb of the virgin. After the baptism of Jesus, this same divine force will move Jesus out to the desert and thence to his mission. This Spirit of Jesus, after the resurrection, will bring the Church to life continually.

So as we approach Christmas, we ask for interiority. We ask for the insight, reverence, and joy—in other words, the depth of faith—called for by the Nativity. We ask the Holy Spirit for the gift the season calls for.



As we approach Christmas,  
we ask for interiority.

# The Kingdom of Children

*Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.*

MARK 10:15

**T**he Nativity season is about the Holy Child and holy childhood. It spurs us to ponder the words of Jesus, so simple, so profound, “Let the children come to me...” (Mark 10:14). What was Jesus recommending to adults, even as he praised children and embraced them? I think above all of their openness to the divine, their being a clean sheet, a *tabula rasa*, for the Holy Spirit to write on.

Children are adventurous and curious, full of questions, and enthusiasts for what catches their interest—dinosaurs for instance. Children are imaginative. They are good at dreaming up, but also at picturing what they are told. How sensitive children are, hurting when someone else hurts, including animals, and quick to reciprocate affection. As to liveliness, children are unmatched—eager in games, so often laughing and joyful. To top it off, children can surprise us with generosity.

This is not to romanticize children as ideal little humans before the spoilage begins. Charles Dickens tended that way. Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) mocked this tendency with the clever and spiteful children in some of her stories. But indeed there is everything hopeful about childhood. It is what Jesus recognized and treasured. Whatever your education and smarts, Jesus says, be like them.



**Be not childish  
but childlike.**



The Advent season calls us to focus on preparation. And being prepared to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ is something we can only get better at with each Advent and Christmas season.

**DAYbreaks** offers daily Scripture passages and meditations to deepen our connection to God and help us prepare for Christ's birth. Father Torrens provides insight and reflection to keep us focused on the arrival of our Savior.

**Liguori Publications © 2014 All rights reserved. • Liguori.org • 800-325-9521**

**JAMES TORRENS** is a Jesuit priest based in the Diocese of Fresno, California. He has been a long-term faculty member at Santa Clara University; an editor at *America*, the national Jesuit magazine; and a spiritual director at the House of Prayer for Priests in Los Angeles.

Imprimi Potest: Harry Grile, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, The Redemptorists  
Published by Liguori Publications, Liguori, Missouri 63057 • To order, call 800-325-9521 • [www.liguori.org](http://www.liguori.org)  
Copyright © 2011 Liguori Publications

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All Rights Reserved.

Design: Pam Hummelsheim • Cover image: Shutterstock • Interior images: Shutterstock, iStockphoto

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 / 5 4 3 2 1



**Liguori**

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE  
LIGUORI MO 63057-9999

ISBN 978-0-7648-1975-9



9

780764 819759