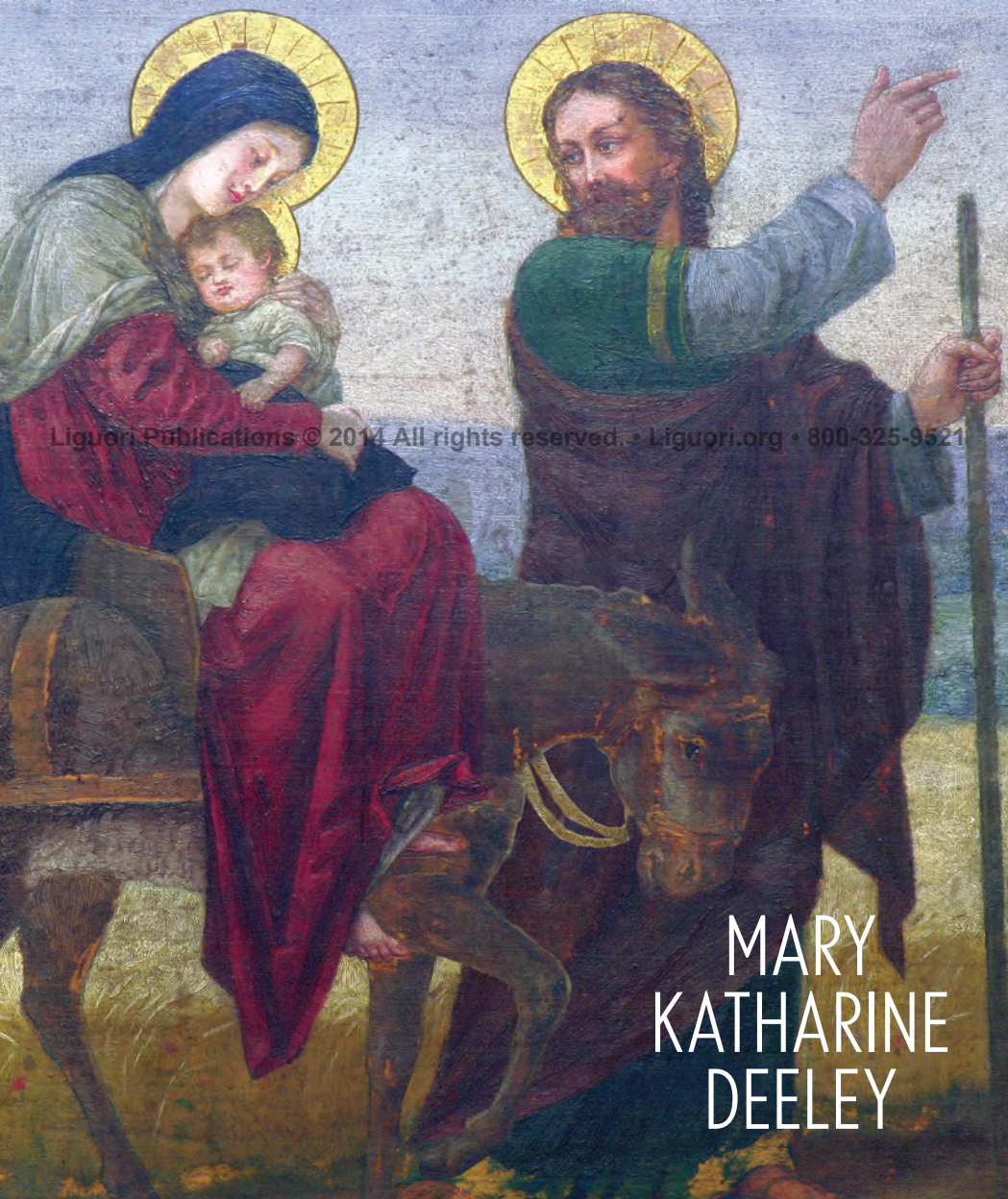


DAYBREAKS

Daily Reflections for Advent and Christmas



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MARY
KATHARINE
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Daily Prayer

Gracious God, Lord of all,
You bring us back to the beginning
so that we might remember what it is we long for, hope for, wait for.
We long for you to be born in our hearts,
as you were born into a stable so long ago,
that we may feel your presence and love every time
we reach out toward another or call your name.
We hope for your grace and Spirit to rain down
and spill over into our lives
so that our words and actions might bear witness
to your presence in this world.
We wait for your coming again to gather us in
so that we can make our home with you
through all eternity.
Grant us joy in our longing,
peace in our hoping, and
patience in our waiting.
And give us a quick step
to respond to you when
we see you at last.
We ask this through Christ,
our Lord.
Amen.



Introduction

Changed Priorities Ahead

My city paper ran an article on street signs. My favorite came from England, where reversible travel lanes allowed rush-hour traffic to run more smoothly in the morning and evening by simply changing the direction of one lane of traffic. The sign indicating that a lane was designated for oncoming traffic was simple and to the point. It read, Changed Priorities Ahead. This is the sign, I thought, that should be on the front lawn of every church in every town on the first Sunday of Advent.

For what is Advent, if not the season to get our priorities straight, to remember what is important to us and why, and to figure out how to let go of what we want in order to embrace with joy what we really need? There was a bit of divine inspiration in making Advent the beginning of the great Church year. New beginnings inspire us to make a fresh start. They make us look at where we have been, so that we can make the necessary changes to get where we're going.

For Christians, this new beginning is also a reminder of the hope in which we live. That hope has its source in the birth of a child some two thousand years ago—a child we know in our hearts to be God-with-us. In this season, we share the hope of our ancestors who eagerly awaited this birth. We enter into the hope that Christ will—even now—be born in our hearts and minds so that we might be transformed by his spirit. And we awaken our hope for Christ to come again so that we might finally dwell with him forever.

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Embrace what God says is possible.



Find Your Mission Statement

Mission statements are big business for corporations, institutions, and people who seek focus and ways of measuring success in their lives. They help us navigate the business of life. Done well, they also tell a little something about who we are and what we hope for. Done *very* well, they invite and even entice others to join the cause.

In the beginning of our spiritual year, nothing could be more timely than to ask, What is *your* mission this Advent? Now is the time to reset our imagination, think way outside the box, and enter this season of preparation in ever deeper ways. Now is the time to dream about what the coming of the Messiah might mean for us.

We find the answers in a myriad of strange images: valleys raised up, mountains made low, peace between lions and lambs. We hear the answers in the multiple commands to stay awake and keep watch. We know the answers in hearts that earnestly seek a savior and find a child. Our mission in Advent is to embrace what God says as possible and to believe that what God says will be so. Our mission is to give witness to what is possible in us by God's grace and through God's power. Light can shine in our darkness, and a stable can be the birthplace of a king.



*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken
to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.*

LUKE 1:45

Monday, First Week of Advent

The Joy of Advent

In a sermon for Advent, Karl Rahner—Jesuit and theologian—exhorted the congregation to see that they had already chosen the joy of Advent. Such joy was a soothing consolation against the uncertainty of the heart. We might think waiting is exciting, maddening, or frustrating, but we rarely think of it as joyful. And yet Rahner begs us to look again.

How can the mere act of waiting be joyful? Any pregnant woman can tell us. It's certainly not in the day-to-day living-out of the pregnancy. We cannot think about the miracle of birth every single day. Backs hurt and feet get sore. We have no control over what our bodies look like. But now and then the baby kicks or turns over, and that's interesting. We dream about what the baby will look like; we anticipate the first touch and the first laugh. Suddenly we realize our hearts have chosen to be joyful—to overlook the discomfort, inconvenience, and even uncertainty in favor of what is to come.

This is how Advent is for Christians. It is deep joy in the face of occasional discomfort, inconvenience, and uncertainty. We know this God who came to Bethlehem, and we know God will come again. Then, as before, the whole world will rejoice!



You have, my heart, already chosen the joy of Advent.

*With joy you will draw water
at the fountain of salvation.*

ISAIAH 12:3

Tuesday, First Week of Advent

What Are We Watching For?

In our busyness, we tend to get caught up in “What’s happening next?” We make lists of things to do and check them twice for safe measure. All the while, we look ahead to the next errand, schedule, shopping expedition, or family gathering. We look for Christmas and hope it won’t come before we finish preparations. But the cost of looking ahead so intently is that we sometimes miss the very thing for which we are looking.

God doesn’t operate on our schedule. The signs of God’s presence are here and now. Christ is born in the hearts of emergency workers who rush to the aid of those caught in disasters. Christ is born in those who share what they have—in every season of the year—with those who have less. Christ is born any place where service to others and the praise of God is a way of life. The question is not whether we’re ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25. It’s whether we see where Christ is being born right now.

What are we watching for? Today we watch for the presence of God in the faces of love and in the words and actions of the Body of Christ. We listen for a voice that shouts in our wilderness, “Ready or not, I’m already here.” And when Christmas comes, we will praise God, who is already with us and will come again.



God doesn’t operate on our schedule.

Come, and you will see.

JOHN 1:39

Wednesday, First Week of Advent

Always More to Learn

Somewhere past childhood and before we're on our own—often around age eighteen—most of us conclude that our parents are dumb and don't know anything. With amazing frequency, that deduction seems to disappear about the time we get the first apartment and find ourselves managing the details of our own lives. "Dad, how do you make fried rice?" "Mom, what laundry detergent do you use?" "What do I do if—?" These plaintive questions allow us to acknowledge gaps in our self-sufficiency and help us find humility in our adulthood.

It's much the same way with Advent. One of our greatest temptations is to believe we know it all and that God can show us nothing new. And yet—and yet—just when we settle into complacency, supposing we've seen it all and that what always has been shall be, we come face to face with God's promise. That's when he enters our world, showing us exactly how much we don't know of love and compassion, justice, and righteousness. "Lord, how do we love our enemies? How do we know the right thing to do?" Our questions help us to once again discover humility in our ignorance, and they open us up to the grace that allows us to be disciples.



The temptation is to believe we know it all.

See, I am doing something new!

ISAIAH 43:19

Thursday, First Week of Advent

The Light of the World

God had only to speak the word *light*, Genesis tells us, and light came into being. In later years, the rabbis added that the Word of God was so powerful that the echo of it continues to create light to this very day. John's Gospel dispenses with the story of the birth of Jesus most of us know from reading the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. There are no angels, shepherds, or magi. No messenger from God appears in the restless dreams of a Jewish man or in the home of a young Jewish woman. Instead, John calls Jesus the Word of God, and he says that the Word was God. He also says the Word is a light to all people, a light darkness cannot overcome.

The experience of Jesus for those who lived more than two thousand years ago echoes in us. Today, the spirit of Jesus dwells in the hearts of believers who gather in his name and pray. Today, the work of Jesus—truly divine and truly human—continues in the Church, which strives to be the Body of Christ to the world.

How do we best allow the light that is Christ to shine in us so that those who live in darkness can see it? How do we become the echo of the Word of God that will lead others to faith?



The Word is a light to all people.

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

JOHN 1:5

Provoking One Another to Love

If the statistics are correct, the weeks leading up to Christmas are a paradox. They're at once joy-filled and anxiety-ridden. Sometimes the holidays—and often the people associated with them—provoke us in the same way alarm clocks, splinters, and paper cuts do. They nag at us and beg to be addressed, pulling at us insistently until we take care of whatever they need.

But sometimes provoking us is the only way to move us out of our comfort zones and into action. Being provoked makes us examine our assumptions, investigate our lives, and discover the ways we need to change. In one biblical translation, the letter to the Hebrews invites us to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Maybe the presence of irritating situations and people is God's way of provoking us into seeing how much more we need to love one another and where our actions can reflect Jesus' command to feed his sheep—and feed them with compassion, mercy, and justice.

Today we celebrate what provokes us this season, and we recall the times we have been provocative for someone else. Only then can we know our need for the grace of God and ask for the peace only God can give.



Celebrate what provokes you this season.

*And let us consider how to provoke one another
to love and good deeds.*

HEBREWS 10:24 (NRSV)

Saturday, First Week of Advent

Do You Clearly Understand All This?

At the beginning of the baptismal rite, parents are asked what they seek for their child. They answer “baptism.” The priest talks about raising the child in the faith and asks if the parents clearly understand what they are asking. I always smile a little at that question, because if parents truly understood what they were doing, they might never have done it in the first place. God keeps parents in happy ignorance so they will say yes—both to having children and also to their baptism.

In spite of all the promises (or maybe because of them), God kept his people in happy ignorance regarding exactly what it might mean to send his Son to walk with us. Jesus’ birth heralds our own birth to newness of life in God. At the same time, it also means the death of everything that keeps us from God. And it is difficult to let go of some things—like the need for control and material wealth, or the hundred little ways we fail to love one another.

Do we clearly understand what the coming of Jesus means for us? No—it will be everything and nothing like we expect. But that’s why we can enter Advent with the same eagerness of new parents looking forward to every change in their infant and in themselves.



Do you clearly understand what God is asking?

*I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

MARK 1:7-8

Advent is the season to get our priorities straight—to remember what is important to us and why—and to figure out how to let go of what we *want* so we can embrace with joy what we really *need*. Mary Katharine Deeley's Scripture selections and reflections help us find this peace during the hustle and bustle of the season so we can "prepare the way of the Lord" in a way that's guaranteed to enhance our faith.



MARY KATHARINE DEELEY (MDiv, Yale Divinity School; PhD, Northwestern University) parlayed an early degree in music into an abiding love for ministry and Scripture. Mary has taught and ministered in academic settings since 1978. As pastoral associate and director of the Christ the Teacher Institute at Sheil Catholic Center at Northwestern University, she works with students and associates in discernment processes, leadership development, spiritual direction, and education and formation.

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