

Advent Daybreaks

Daily Reflections for Advent and Christmas

Bishop Robert F. Morneau



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Introduction

In the Book of Ecclesiastes we are reminded, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (3:1). Advent is one of those seasons, and the "matter" we encounter is the great mystery of God coming among us in the Incarnation. Year after year, season after season, we are invited to open our hearts again and again to this advent, this coming of our God. If we are attentive to God's daily approaches and respond with gracious hospitality, our Christmas celebration will be one of peace and joy.

We are well advised not to travel alone during Advent or any season of our life. As a pilgrim people we are blessed to have the communion of saints as our companions. More specifically, we have in our company Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is the Advent person, modeling for us the four things that define discipleship: listening, loving, obedience, and self-giving. Mary listened to the message of the angel Gabriel and responded with love. She was willing to do whatever God asked of her. But she had questions for Gabriel.

We, too, are haunted by things divine, and we have questions. Even at a young age, the questions can begin to surface. The only answer is love, that love is everywhere, in our birth and in our dying. It is the faith in every person's heart.

Advent is the great season of God's love for us. Far beyond the gifts of time and talent, far beyond the gifts of freedom and friends, is the gift of God's own self to us. This self-giving in Jesus through the Holy Spirit is at the heart of Christianity. It is because of this that Jesus can be in the crib, on the cross, and present within us simultaneously. How enduring is God's love for us!



First Sunday of Advent

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Hope's Lexicon

*A*dvent is a season of hope. We look to the future with a forward eye, aware that God's coming is near. The feast of the Nativity is but four weeks away, and we must begin again that serious preparation that will welcome our Emmanuel, our King of glory.

Hope is difficult to define as are her sisters, faith and love. These great theological virtues are mysterious in their origin and their destiny. And yet, for an acorn dreaming about becoming an oak tree, hope is most practical. We are on our way to welcoming the divine Guest, and nothing is more real than the reality of God.

Hope's lexicon contains many words, but *promise*, *waiting*, and *courage* offer insight into this precious and powerful theological virtue.

PROMISE! The renewal of wedding promises at anniversary celebrations is a splendid example of "realized hope." Twenty-five, fifty, sixty years ago a couple stood before the altar and promised to be true to each other whatever the circumstances, be it health or sickness, good times or bad. Hope is grounded in a promise. God's promise is one of presence, be it in Scripture, the sacraments, the community, or the divine indwelling in our hearts. God is with us every step of the way.

WAITING! Hope is a "not yet" experience. We hope to get our college degree; we hope the cancer report will be good news. This "not yet" factor in our life demands great patience. Just as we wait for various goods—health, victory, success—God also awaits us. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his encyclical letter "On Christian Hope" that we are awaited by Love. Here is the ground for our hope: God is waiting to welcome us home.

COURAGE! Too easily we can be discouraged, depressed, even feel despair. Much courage is needed to face the "slings and arrows" of our existence. Our sins, our failures, and our broken relationships can thwart our sense of hope. Love has its lexicon: concern, respect, giving. Faith has its lexicon: conviction, confidence, commitment. So too hope, for in her great dictionary are the Advent words of promise, waiting, and courage.

Hope is grounded in promise.

Revelation

Mary Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964), one of the finest short-story writers of the twentieth century, ends her story “Revelation” with a revelation. Mrs. Turpin, a self-righteous and condescending soul, has a vision of the end time. All the people she despised—white trash, lunatics, and freaks—were all rumbling toward heaven ahead of her and her husband, Claud. She was shocked and dismayed.

Apparently God has a sense of humor, at least for Flannery O'Connor. Part of the divine plan is to engage us in the truth of things: who we are and what life is all about. We so easily have illusions of our own grandeur and distorted views of others. It often takes a shocking revelation, a startling vision, to awaken us to the way things really are.

Advent has its revelatory moments. Be it the star for the Magi or the angels for the shepherds, divine providence invites us to discover the presence of grace. Jesus is the great divine revelation. In him we see the face of God and the offer of a whole new life. In Jesus, born of Mary, is the revelation of the essence of humility and holiness.

In O'Connor's “Revelation,” Mrs. Turpin was struck in the head by a book thrown by an obnoxious young girl, Mary Grace. Then Mrs. Turpin, holding her breath, waiting as if for a revelation, asked her what she had to say. The young girl then calls Mrs. Turpin an “old wart hog.” This slice of revelation, so disturbing, was the beginning of truth for Mrs. Turpin.

During this season of Advent, I hope we will not need violence to awaken us to the way things are.

Advent is a season of revelatory moments.

Gratitude and Duty

Andrew Jackson was president of the United States (twenty-four states at that time) between 1829 and 1837. Orphaned at age fourteen, surrounded by a culture of confrontation and violence, beset with ill health, he attempted to fulfill his duties as president as best he could. His mother left him with a lesson that influenced his life: to forget an obligation or be ungrateful is a crime—not merely a fault or sin.

Advent is a fitting season to examine our obligations and duties as it is a suitable time to recount the kindnesses that have come our way. Many spiritual writers tell us over and over again that the path to holiness is the joyful fulfillment of our duties in whatever state of life God has called us to live. For parents, that is the faithful raising of children; for doctors, the responsible care of patients; for teachers, well-prepared classes. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux advises to do everything, even the most humble of tasks, with love.

Ingratitude is a serious matter. King Lear's haunting line should be embedded in our memory: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child" (Act 1, Scene 4). Our gratitude to God should be a daily exercise, just as it should be to all who have shown us kindness.

Making ingratitude or duties unfulfilled a crime might be going too far. But the seriousness of these matters cannot be denied.

*"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is /
To have a thankless child."*

What Does God Do All Day?

*F*irst graders are experts in asking questions such as, "What does God do all day?" We all know the importance of job descriptions that delineate responsibilities and expectations. With great innocence, our first graders are not afraid to question our God about divine activity.

Isaiah the prophet has a partial answer to the question. God provides rich food and choice wines for his people; God wipes away the tears of the suffering; God removes our shame and guilt through the grace of mercy (Isaiah 25). Our God is one who gives life, who heals the brokenhearted, who comes to set us free from sin and death. There is great cause here to be glad and rejoice. Then there is the story in Matthew's Gospel (15:34–37) in which Jesus feeds the crowd with seven loaves and a few fish. What God does in Jesus is to give thanks, bless, break, and give food to the hungry. Sounds like the Eucharist: Jesus took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to the disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus does the same today. We are the recipients of God's divine activity.

Beneath the writings of Isaiah and Matthew is a rich theology. Our God is creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. What our God does all day is gives life, reunites us to himself, and sustains our spiritual growth moment by moment. We should be grateful to first graders for their profound questions.

We are the recipients of God's divine activity.

The Great Ones

A warning is issued in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that madness in great people should not go unnoticed. (See Act 3, Scene 1.) Great people, or at least those considered great, are often in positions of power, be they presidents of a country, international bankers, or noted scholars. They have the ability to bring about or inhibit change for good or ill. If the great ones are mad, they merit close watching.

John the Baptist was "great." In fact, we hear in Scripture that no one greater than John had been born. In what does John's greatness lie? Obviously, he was not a leader of a nation nor a CEO of a large corporation. Rather, he was a prophet who served the concerns and thoughts of God. Greatness lies in service, in being for others and laying down one's life for their welfare.

Does Shakespeare's warning apply to John and other prophets? Although some might characterize prophets as crazy, it is a divine madness. So committed are the great ones of God that nothing else matters than furthering the kingdom. These deserve not only careful watching but supreme emulation.

Power comes in many forms: political, economic, social, cultural. Yet what is more powerful, what is greater than words? Language transforms vision and shapes our destiny. And it is the prophet who uses words to bring about the transformation of the world. As Emily Dickinson would agree, a word is not dead when it is said.

Greatness lies in service.

The Poetry of Advent

Poetry has power. A phrase, a line, a stanza can change our imagination, thus affecting our attitude, which in turn influences our behavior. A good companion for the Advent season is the poet/priest George Herbert (1593–1633).* His verse brought about transformation in the life of Simone Weil and many other influential people. Some phrases from his “The Church Porch” may even enrich our inner and outer lives.

“By all means use sometimes to be alone. / Salute thyself: see what thy soul doth wear” (145–146). Our souls hunger for community; our souls hunger for solitude. We need to take those ten to fifteen minutes every day to go into solitude and listen to the voice of our approaching God.

“All worldly joys go less / To the one joy of doing kindnesses” (329–330). Many joys in this world lead us to sing and dance. Winning the lottery overjoys a family; joy comes to the city that wins the World Series; then there is the joy of earning a diploma. Indeed, all are causes for rejoicing. But to do a good deed, a random act of kindness, here is eternal joy that will never fade.

“Sum up at night, what thou has done by day; / And in the morning, what thou has to do. / Dress and undress thy soul” (451–453). Advent is a fitting season to take off our masks, put away our pretenses, quiet the ego, and hold up the naked soul to its divine Maker. Mornings and evenings are great times to do this.

Poetry has power.

**The English Works of George Herbert. Houghton, Mifflin and Co. 1905.*

De Gustibus

The ancient Latin expression *De gustibus non est disputandum*—"There is no disputing tastes"—has considerable validity. Some people like sauerkraut while others love chocolate; some individuals select wine while others prefer a soda; classical music stirs some souls while country-western is preferred by others. Different personalities have different preferences, and there is no need to argue or dispute the matter.

Regarding the world of religious art, the Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches find icons to be an enriching experience of their faith. Icons (Greek word for "image") are representations of spiritual persons or themes that seek to draw the viewer into the mystery depicted. Thus an icon of Mary, Jesus' mother, or that of the Trinity or Jesus is meant to foster the contemplation of these individuals and mysteries. Some individuals find icons to be powerful ways to deepen faith, while others prefer another form of religious art.

During this first week of Advent we celebrate the feast of Saint John of Damascus. John was a defender of the veneration of icons. This Greek father found great significance in the icons that depicted our beliefs and important personages. He also found beauty and truth in composing religious hymns. We should be grateful that Saint John of Damascus revered his own taste and yet would have been willing, I am sure, to say *De gustibus* to anyone who had different preferences.

There is no disputing tastes.

ADVENT IS THE SEASON in which we prepare to encounter the great mystery of the Incarnation. Year after year, season after season, we are invited to open our hearts again and again to this event, this coming of our God.

In *Advent Daybreaks*, Auxiliary Bishop Robert Morneau offers daily reflections of God's endearing love for us. Each reflection will remind you of the gift of God's own self to us. Let each day be a celebration of peace and joy.

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