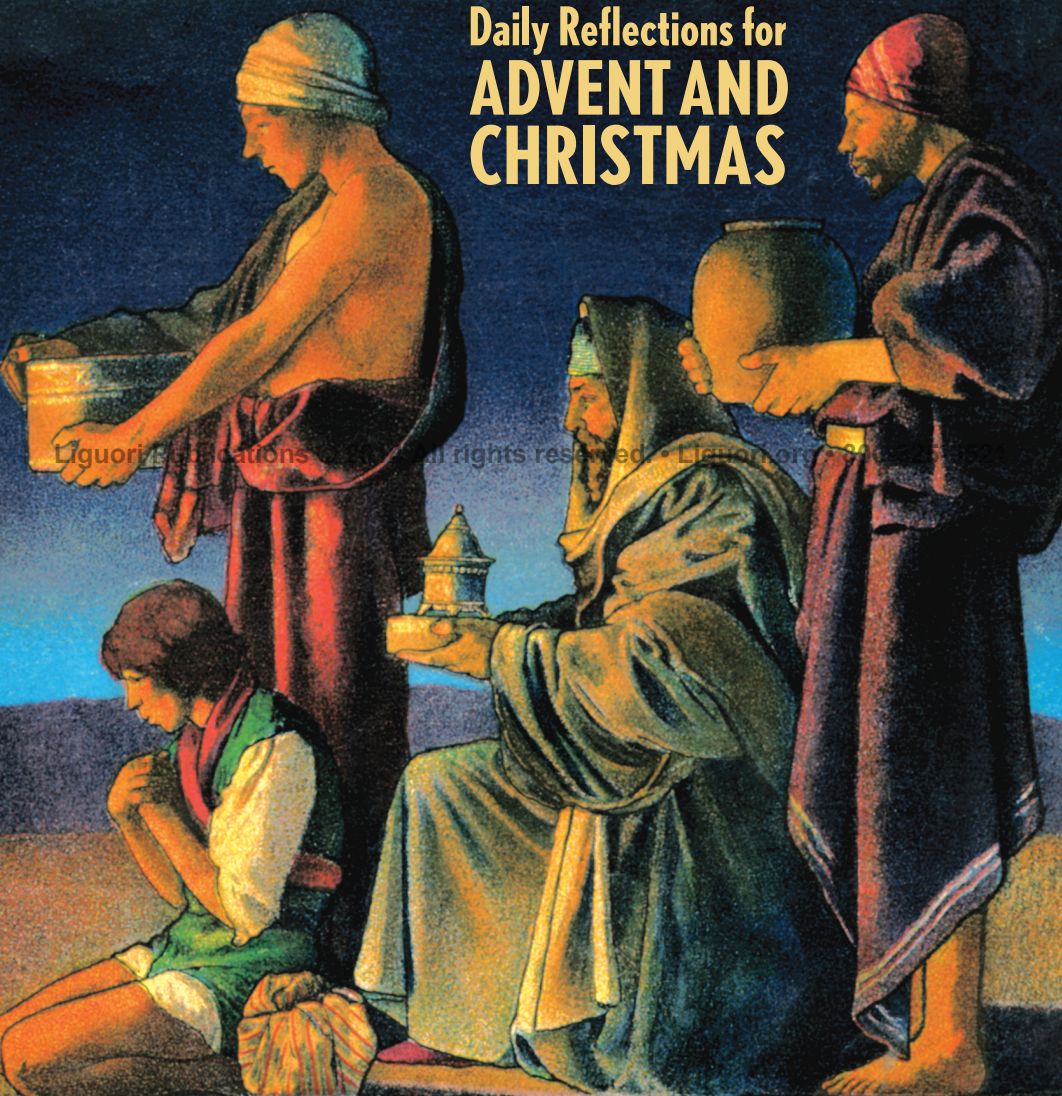


DAYBREAKS

Daily Reflections for
**ADVENT AND
CHRISTMAS**



JOHN F. KAVANAUGH, SJ

*That I live
That I breathe
That I see and hear, even a little
That I have a heart to feel
A mind to know and remember by,
I thank you most bountiful and close God
Made one with us in Jesus Christ
And present to us
Even in the million ways
I forget.*

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Introduction

Like the themes of every Advent, the daily reflections here are marked by a sense of waiting and longing. They remind us not only of our great need for God but also of the brokenness of the world, mirrored by the brokenness in our hearts.

I propose, however, a quite contrasting daily exercise for the reader. In order for God to more fully enter our lives, let us more fully enter our own. Consider it a way of extending the great feast of Thanksgiving. Advent can so easily be co-opted by the mania of consumerism, sparked by that greatest shopping spree of the year on the Friday after Thanksgiving, fueled by our deepest spiritual hungers that we suspect could be eased by some magical gift of grace.

If we try to make Thanksgiving stretch all the way through Advent and to the end of the year, we might find that Emmanuel will be “with us” in unexpected ways. Just as Mary’s Advent was one of gratitude spoken in the Magnificat, let ours be a time of naming how God has done “great things” in us.

Starting with the first of December take a lined eight by eleven sheet of paper. They usually have 30 lines. Each day, for each line, write down two items: something in your world you give thanks for and someone in your life you give thanks for. Your Christmas will be different if you do this. Having become more present to your passing days, you may see how God is with you. By the last day of the year, you will have a page of gifts. And as the new year starts, you might, with Mary, “treasure these things” in your heart.

Not waiting, but entering.

JOHN KAVANAUGH, SJ

Eager Days

The days are coming.”

Once the celebration of Thanksgiving was over, I would go to the windows almost every morning, looking for snow. It is one of my earliest memories, a tissue of images held together by feelings that always had something to do with expectancy.

For children of other countries or climates, the prod might not have been Thanksgiving or the thought of snow, but I wouldn't be surprised if the early days of Advent were, for Christian boys and girls, eager ones. Some children had Advent calendars, others had wreaths decked with candles. Many observed the strangely prophetic feast of St. Nicholas, with its long stockings bulging with many small promises of greater gifts to come.

Songs changed with December. Worldly anxiety combined with hope in “You better watch out...Santa Claus is coming to town.” The “Dance of the Toy Soldiers” made the spine tingle. And church hymns deepened everything: “O come, O come,” “Wake, awake, for the night is dying.”

Advent is anticipation. Jeremiah thrives on it: “The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise....I will raise up a just shoot... He shall do what is right and just in the land. In those days Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem secure.”

Advent is promise and prayer. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians brims with desire: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love. May he...strengthen your hearts.”

But the high hopes of both Jeremiah and Paul were electric with apprehension as well. They both wrote in ages of turmoil and threat. Jeremiah felt cold exile and utter loss. Paul wrote to a community besieged by change and alien powers, in words apocalyptic. There was much to fear.

Fears, too, are feelings of childhood. We commence our lives with such daunting vulnerability. The unknown, the unmanageable, the treacherous are everywhere. We await the return of the familiar all the more urgently: the reappearance of the parent gone a mere few hours; the replay of joys we beg our parents to repeat once more; the clinging to comfort when doom approaches.

Advent is promise and prayer.

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A Candle That Dispels the Darkness



In another Advent, perhaps my tenth, I saw the face of a child go from death to life. She was a mere three years old and was with her mother on a Christmas-shopping day. In the aisles of an enormous department store she lost the center of her life, who happened to be thumbing through bargains on the other side of the world—an insignificant clothing table away.

The child's temple collapsed. Her face blotched with high shame and sorrow. Sobs erupted with instant convulsion. And then the mother swooped from nowhere to cradle the girl in arms that transformed the shrieks into tears of relief and joy.

Life, from its beginning, bears its gloomy portents. They need not presage the end of the world or even the fall of our mightiest temples. But any child can suspect that all might easily be lost. As Freud reminded us, we begin to die the moment we are born.

A passage from Luke's Gospel on the destruction of Jerusalem has Jesus speaking to our hope in the midst of doom. He invokes the imagery of all our primal fears: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars." Jesus tells of nations in anguish. Seas roar, waves crash upon us. People die of fright. Darkening skies and longer nights announce the winter of life. But the child in us looks for the sign of love in the sky, the rainbows of fall, the snows that brighten the earth, the arms that reach down to lift us up. We love to light the candle that dispels the dark. We can't wait to open the next window on the Advent calendar.

We begin to die the moment we are born.



Advent: A Forced Time of Year?



As a child, I thought that Advent was an artificial thing. It seemed a forced time of year, a concoction to get us excited about the coming of Christmas. It felt fake.

After all, the birth of Christ had happened a long time ago. What was the point of pretending that it hadn't? It was like going through the motions of contrived expectancy when we knew the outcome in advance.

Now I am beginning to see Advent differently. The cycle of the seasons that we as a worshipping people live through each year is not an exercise in "let's pretend" at all. It is an ongoing journey into deeper reality. It is a recognition that the entry of God into our lives, while its essence is accomplished, is still psychologically unfinished.

As long as we breathe, there is more of our lives to open, to unbar, to unlock. There is always more of us that we might let God enter.

There is no end to the ways that the Word of God can more fully take on our flesh.

This is especially true of our need to acknowledge how utterly we rely on God's healing power for our salvation. We so much want to be whole and finished that our greatest temptation is to think and hope the task is done. Oh, if this conversion could only be our last. If this long journey of faith could be neat, final, and complete.

*Advent is an ongoing journey
into a deeper reality.*

Dream or Nightmare?



Was it good news for Joseph when the angel appeared and told him about Isaiah's virgin "with child"? Was he thrilled that Mary would give birth to a baby boy called Immanuel? The angel was speaking, we may presume, of the woman Joseph loved. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

This was supposed to be a consoling message, given as it was by an angel. But I've wondered now and then whether Joseph ever had any negative thoughts about the whole thing. Is it possible that he experienced a tiny twinge of jealousy about the Holy Spirit? This may seem preposterous to say, but at times Joseph may have wondered whether it was a dream he had or a nightmare.

I've often thought about the incident in somewhat literal, realistic terms. Here is this man betrothed to a woman who is going to bear a child that is not his own "flesh and blood." Everything is already worked out: the child will be a boy and have the name of Jesus. It's one thing to believe that such an event could occur. It is quite another to accept it and take joy in it. I wonder if Joseph ever felt he was in some way robbed. Anyway, when Joseph awoke, he did as the angel directed and welcomed Mary into his home.

*Did Joseph ever have negative thoughts
about the birth of Jesus?*

Accepted in Faith



If we assume that Joseph was happy with the prospect of being a foster father to this future savior of his people, things did not work out very well. In fact, just about everything was botched up. Instead of security and comfort, they found themselves facing a treacherous journey during the last stage of Mary's pregnancy. So much for well-wrought plans that any father, foster or not, would want to make. They would have no suitable place to stay, no family or friends around. The earliest days would be full of fear and flight. The first ceremony in the temple would be marred by the ominous prediction of an old seer that his son would be rejected and his wife would have her very soul pierced.

After the early years of migration and displacement, even when the family finally settled down, there was more trouble. The lad would be misplaced in Jerusalem and, after a three-day search, he would show up reminding them that he had another "Father" who made a greater claim on him.

Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, was the man who would be Christianity's historic image of the good provider, the protector. Did he feel like that, this man of flesh and blood, this decent and just man? Was it a struggle for him to believe that any good would come of it?

Whatever he may have felt, as an earthly father he must have died a thousand deaths caring for that woman and child, both of whom he had accepted in faith as belonging finally to one other than himself. So it is with every true parent, every true spouse.

*Joseph is Christianity's image of the good provider,
the protector.*



Stealing Christmas



Although I've never read the tale or seen the film, reliable sources tell me that "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" is about a jealous critter, posing as Santa Claus, who steals all the gifts set aside for children. A little girl spies the theft. The rest of the children, undaunted by their loss, celebrate Christmas anyway.

There are all sorts of Grinches who steal Christmas. Just think of the moves to call it "Xmas" or of Christmas stamps without the Madonna and Child. After all, the only reason we are celebrating is a baby whose birth changed the course of history. Even some theologians seem to steal Christmas away with pronouncements that such a miracle could never have happened.

Like the young girl and all her friends in the story, the little ones—the little people—somehow celebrate Christmas anyway.

Perhaps that's how Christmas celebrations actually got started in the early fourth century. If the Roman emperor insisted on having his birthday celebrated, the little people decided that they would celebrate the birth of Jesus. If the cultural powers worshiped the sun god at the year's end, Christians would exalt the Son of God.

The high and mighty eventually caught on. By the year 350, the Church made Christmas a special feast. Three decades later, the Roman Empire followed suit. Commemorating the birth of Jesus spread throughout Europe. And by 600, Augustine of Canterbury baptized ten-thousand converts on that holy day. For almost a millennium, Christmas was the special feast of the poor, the common people, the little ones.

*The "little people" somehow celebrate Christmas
no matter what.*



Light of the World



By the sixteenth century, with its political, national, and ecclesiastical wars, Christmas was disappearing from many places. The Puritans condemned and abolished Christmas as something pagan and idolatrous. They even tried to make observing it a sin. In 1642 services were banned. No decorations were allowed. Two years later Christmas was declared a time of fast and penance. In 1647 Parliament, that corporate Grinch, totally banned Christmas. Markets were ordered to stay open. Longer work hours were enforced. The little people did not like this at all. There were riots. Ten-thousand people demonstrated in Kent.

The monarchy, thinking that plum pudding, mince pie, goose, and “good will” could make up for the theft, allowed for secular celebration, not wanting to seem a Scrooge. But even in the 1700s, when Charles Wesley was penning “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” a more refined mind pronounced: “There is no place for Christmas in the modern world.”

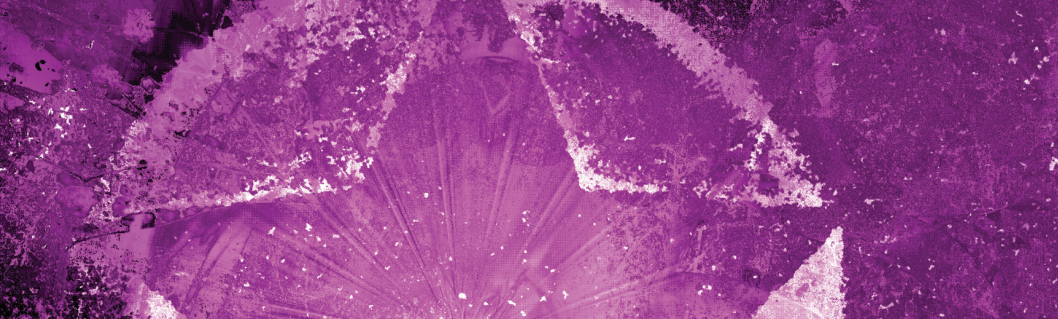
Although Christmas was outlawed in New England until 1850, and people were forced to work that day while their children were ordered to school, subversive practices from olden times persisted. Folklore defied the Grinches: there were reports of cattle and deer on their knees, birds singing in the snow, bees humming in harmony, animals talking. Trees, decked with fruit, promised a new Eden. Breaded wafers and glowing candles hung from branches.

As it was then, so it will be. There is a mystery in Christmas far brighter than presents, more persistent than the great wars or personal sorrows that seem to steal it away. Christmas is about the child who became the bread of life.

The Grinch, by the way, had a change of heart. Apparently what did the trick was seeing the joy of children.

There is mystery in Christmas far brighter than presents.





Every Advent is marked by a sense of waiting and longing. These reflections remind us not only of our great need for God but also of the brokenness of the world mirrored by the brokenness in our hearts. Experience an Advent apart from the mania of consumerism. Let it be a time to give thanks to those we love, to welcome the gift of the Christ child, to permit God to do great things in us.

Begin each day this Advent season with a *Daybreaks* meditation. Find a quiet place where you can be open to the peaceful presence of God. These reflections take only a few moments. Allow time for the words to sink in, for the message to unfold. Consider how these ideas might change your life, challenge your attitudes, and inform your heart.

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