

Advent on the Inside

Are you ready for this? Are you ready for the promise fulfilled and the possibility realized? Ready for anticipation, excitement, and gobsmacking, joy-filled amazement? Are you ready to lace up your sandals, grip your walking stick, and journey down the dusty road that leads to the love you believe in?

This changes everything. At least it ought to. But before Christmas can truly change the world around us, we must first let it change the world within us. Advent calls us to prepare our hearts and minds, our muscles and bones, and our moods and attitudes so incarnation can seep through our neurons and soak into our marrow.

The journey ahead awakens us to new light. Are we ready to turn our lives toward this brilliant sun? Are we ready to encounter the radiant Creator not only around us and among us, but also within us? Christ seeks to enter the world by first coming to life inside us. We know this, of course, but are we ready to let it happen? If so, let's go...

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, A division of Bayard; One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200;
New London, CT 06320; (860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411; www.twentythirdpublications.com

ISBN: 978-1-62785-661-4 ■ Cover photo: ©Shutterstock.com / Bobby Stevens Photo

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NOVEMBER 28
First Sunday of Advent

JEREMIAH 33:14-16 • 1 THESSALONIANS 3:12—4:2 • LUKE 21:25–28, 34–36

The Light WE LET IN

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.”

LUKE 21:25

Driving east at dawn, the sunrise is awe-inspiring. Initially. But before long, you're reaching for sunglasses, lowering the visor, and squinting your eyes as the bright morning star clears the horizon.

As finite beings, we are overwhelmed by our Creator's full magnificence. God's brilliance is mind-blowing. Fortunately, we are continuously gifted with flashes of divine warmth, joy, mercy, kindness, and unrelenting love. They are given to us in the giggle of a child, the comfort of hot chocolate on a cold day, the opening of a flower, the smile of a stranger, and the hug of a grandmother.

This creation and everything in it, as noted in our Genesis story, is good. It is the artwork of the loving Creator. When journeyed well, Advent opens our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to it. By seeing God in the sun, the moon, and the stars, we prepare ourselves to bask in the full warmth of Christ.

DAILY PRACTICE Be someone's sunrise today. With a smile in your eyes and joy on your face, make a call, send a note, or write a post that simply says, "I see Christ alive through you!"

ADVENT PRAYER *Loving Creator of dawn, may the warmth of your light and the spark of your joy ignite compassion in my life.*

The People WE LET IN

“Many will come from the east and the west.”

MATTHEW 8:11

The last words Rooster said to me were, “Thank you for giving me someone to love.” I thought I was on the street to serve him, but I was so wrong. Rooster was a homeless man in the most stereotypical way—a war veteran who self-medicated to numb the pain of trauma and loss. His speech was slurred, his clothing was tattered, and his odor was pungent.

Surely, this man was not a prophet. Oh, but he was! His suffering and vulnerability were right there for all the world to see, yet nearly all the world looked away. I was there to be Christ to him, and in my shallow arrogance was surprised that he was there to be Christ to me.

Divine love is all inclusive. If the conditions of Jesus’ birth teach us anything, it is this: prepare to encounter Christ in the most unexpected people and in the most unexpected places.

DAILY PRACTICE Identify one person whom you would normally ignore or avoid. Look into their eyes and see the vulnerability, the humanity, the pain, and the divine love wanting so badly to be shared.

ADVENT PRAYER *Open my eyes, my mind, and my heart, O Lord, that I might see you, smell you, hear you, and touch you in the vulnerability of every person I encounter.*

The Self-Talk

WE LET IN

They left their nets and followed him.

MATTHEW 4:20

As a ten-year-old little-leaguer, I couldn't hit the ball. Every time I stepped to the plate, I was anxious and tense, and a voice in my head kept saying, "You can't hit a fastball." Sure enough, I never got a hit.

Then one day I looked out and saw Mikey Kleinschmidt pitching for the other team. I liked Mikey. He went to my school and we played together at recess. Suddenly, all I saw was a friend. And when Mikey fired the first pitch, I swung with all my might and knocked the ball off the center field wall. In the flash of friendship, I set down the nets of my anxieties and self-doubts. I quieted the negative voice. I was changed.

When Jesus calls his disciples, when he calls us, the easy part is saying yes—yes, I will follow you! The hard part is leaving our nets behind and walking away from all the inner voices telling us we can't.

DAILY PRACTICE Name the nets that entangle you, the nets that hold you back from swimming freely in the current of Christ's love. What happens if you set those nets down and walk away? Try it today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Grant me the compassion to love as you love, and the spiritual freedom to live as you lived.*

The Loaves

WE LET IN

They all ate and were satisfied.

MATTHEW 15:37

The steak was amazing, the wine brilliant, and the dessert rich. But later I sat up unable to sleep. My heart burned and my mind raced. Clearly, I had eaten until I was full, perhaps too full, but the dinner itself had been unsatisfying. It was a business dinner intended to foster relationships, but there were agendas and politics, so no one relaxed; no one dared recline at table.

There is a difference between being full and being satisfied. How much of our energy and our mind space do we fill with things that are entirely unsatisfying? The brims of our cups often overflow with stress and anxiety. Our lives can be quite full, perhaps even rich, but still empty and unsatisfying.

The gift Jesus shares with us is, indeed, very satisfying. It fills us lovingly with peace, joy, hope, and all good things. Are we preparing for a Christmas that is truly satisfying or one that is merely full?

DAILY PRACTICE Tune yourself to another's deeper hunger. What is it they starve for? A sense of belonging? Forgiveness? Encouragement? Affirmation? Let that be the loaf and fish you share today.

ADVENT PRAYER *Divine Source of all nourishment, you feed the need in others through the gifts you've given to me. Help me see what I have in abundance to feed the world.*

The Rock

WE LET IN

“...be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”

MATTHEW 7:24

Like so many families on hot summer days, Michelle and I would take our kids to the beach where we'd build elaborate sandcastles. The trick was to find the sweet spot where the sand was wet but not within reach of the lapping waves. Still, by late afternoon, the winds would pick up and a more aggressive surf would wash our work back into the cold Lake Michigan waters.

It was a great life lesson on impermanence. Nothing material endures. What remains of all those sandcastles even to this day, however, is the joyful memory of afternoons shared together. I like to believe we raised our kids on these rocks of love.

As we journey through Advent, we find ourselves building sandcastles out of tinsel and lights. In January, the shifting winds will blow it all back into boxes we store in attics. What endures? Hopefully, the love we share. Such is the bedrock that lies in the manger.

DAILY PRACTICE Create a story-worthy memory for someone. This might take a little thinking. What can you say, give, or do that will lift the day for another person?

ADVENT PRAYER *Prepare my heart, my mind, and my character,
O Lord, to serve as a solid rock upon which the tired and weary
can find rest.*

The Faith

WE LET IN

“Do you believe that I can do this?”

MATTHEW 9:28

In the holiday movie *Elf*, Santa’s sleigh is powered by Christmas spirit. As the spirit wanes, the sleigh sputters until it crashes in Central Park. Only after New Yorkers dig within themselves, find their childlike belief, and share Christmas spirit does the sleigh take to the skies once again.

It is a fabulous story that, like most good works of fiction, expresses a larger truth. Our faith, what we actually believe, gives power to all great things. Jesus often links the miracles he performs to the faith of the one who benefits. Indeed, we are reminded that the power of everything he offers us—hope, compassion, healing, wholeness—has no lasting effect if we don’t place our faith in it.

Advent invites us into a deep evaluation of our own faith. What do we really believe in? The idea of a loving unity of all humanity with God has no power unless we truly believe in love, unity, humanity, and God.

DAILY PRACTICE Keep a trust journal today. Write down the names of people, beliefs, experiences, and things you truly trust. How are they different from the sources of your anxiety?

ADVENT PRAYER *Thank you, O God, for the gift of faith, for showing me where my mind, my heart, and my soul can find lasting and profound peace, hope, and love.*

The Heaven

WE LET IN

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

MATTHEW 10:7

Charles waited nervously as Katy walked up the aisle with her father. As they approached, he stepped forward, took his bride by both hands, and whispered, “I love you.” He then embraced her dad who said to him, “This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice. Be glad.”

Surely, for Charles, Katy, and their families, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. If heaven is eternal life in union with our loving God, then the kingdom of heaven is as near as our own heartbeat, as close as our compassion. It can start right here, right now if we choose it.

Jesus comes among us in a radical demonstration of how close God is, so close in fact that he embodies the same flesh and blood as our own. It’s very personal and extremely present. As we walk up the aisle of Advent toward union with the living Christ, let us rejoice and be glad!

DAILY PRACTICE Let this be a day for spreading joy sevenfold. Make a list of seven people and send a small expression of joy toward each.

ADVENT PRAYER

*This is the life, the love, and the day the Lord has made,
let us rejoice and be glad.*