

Introduction

Since I'm writing this in the early months of 2021, it's hard to predict what this Advent will look like. One thing we do know—and feel—is that we have lived the Advent theme of waiting for many, many months: waiting for hugs, for the vaccine, to see family and friends, to celebrate weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and memorial services.

The waiting of Advent—in addition to remembering the waiting of the Old Testament people for a Messiah—is about how we wait in the everydayness of our lives. Even when we aren't in the stronghold of a pandemic, waiting is always with us: waiting for a phone call, a perfect job, a diagnosis, a healing.

Advent waiting, though, is not passive. We're always called to be more, to be a part of the solution. Meister Eckhart said, "What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to the Son of God if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?"

What if instead of waiting for good-enough things to happen to us, we could be the good thing to happen to someone else who's waiting? What if we could cure our own waiting-room addiction by making room in our life to be the good others are waiting for? What if Advent living isn't about what we can expect from life, but what life can expect from us?

Janet Schaeffler, OP

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: 978-1-62785-651-5 ■ Cover photo: ©Shutterstock.com / CURAphotography

Copyright ©2021 Janet Schaeffler, OP. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.
Printed in the U.S.A.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

On God's Side

"Be vigilant at all times..."

LUKE 21:36

In replying to one of his advisors who demanded that he take a particular course of action because he was convinced that "God is on our side," Abraham Lincoln replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

Today's readings invite us, challenge us, to be vigilant, to continually ask: Am I, are we, on God's side?

God's plan is a community concerned about one another, rather than possessions and status. God's vision is care and justice for those who are poor and suffering. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is individuals taking time for prayer. God's vision is pray-ers who put their prayers into action. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is a world daring to forgive, not counting the cost. God's vision is people committed to inclusivity and peacemaking. Are we on God's side?

God's plan is each of us living our calling, created in the image and likeness of God. God's vision is each of us acting as the body of Christ, hope-filled, compassionate, and courageous. Are we on God's side?

DAILY PRACTICE: Decide two things you will do during this Advent season to intensify ways you live on God's side.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Visionary God, guide my actions so that they are on your side, your plans and visions.*

Back to Normal?

House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

ISAIAH 2:5

“I just want to get back to normal!” How many times have we said or heard that in the last twenty-two months?

That wish probably means various things. Yet how are we created? Who are we called to be? Today, Isaiah exhorts us to “walk in the light of the Lord.” Perhaps that means we are created and called not simply to exist but to always be more, to adapt and grow. Stan Lee, the legendary Marvel comic writer who created many superheroes, used an optimistic mantra throughout his life: *Excelsior*, a Latin word meaning “ever upward.”

Looking at all we have become aware of in our last two years, a case can certainly be made for not wanting to return to “normal.” There is a painting that appeared during these times in which two people are looking into the distance. One asks, “When this is over, what should change?” His friend answers, “Everything.”

DAILY PRACTICE: How do you want your life to be “ever upward” because of your recent experiences? What are your dreams for our nation and our world to now walk in the light of the Lord?

ADVENT PRAYER: *Beckoning God, nudge us to learn from our experience, to pay attention to what needs to be changed, to build the world you dream of.*

Scattering Good News

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring [the] good news!

ROMANS 10:15

As a mom drove her eight-year-old to school one morning, he cheerily asked, “Mom, do you want me to throw the confetti in my pocket?” Imagining the time it would take to clean up, she said, “Please, no! Not in the car.” Then she asked, “Why do you have confetti in your pocket?” Her son responded, “It’s my emergency confetti. I carry it everywhere in case there’s good news.”

In today’s first reading, Paul quotes from Isaiah. In Semitic cultures, poets often celebrated various parts (here, feet) of the body of the messenger who brings welcome news. Often people apply this Scripture passage to preachers and catechists.

Yet we are all called to bring good news—by our words, by our actions, by our lives. The little boy was prepared in case there was good news. In reality, there always is—if we just look.

DAILY PRACTICE: During the day, when you might be inclined to comment negatively or see the bad news in a situation, pause to look for, speak, and celebrate the positive, the possibility, the gift, the good news. Share your emergency confetti.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of Good News, help me to scatter the good news of positivity, of affirmation and support, of kindness and care, of your love in my world today.*

F.R.O.G.

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.

PSALM 23:1

During our COVID days, a cartoon appeared illustrating a dialogue with God. The faith-filled person said, “I took advantage of time away to try to find myself.” God asked, “And did you?” “Yeah,” was the reply. God then asked, “Then why are you coming to me?” The honest fellow replied, “I wasn’t enough.”

Many self-help books tell us we are enough: believe in yourself and you can do anything. There’s a kernel of truth there: God created us with the potential (and the call) to use our gifts to become the best we can be. It’s our nature to want to be in charge, to try to figure things out. Often we ask, “Why, God?” or “When, God, when?” We want to know all that’s ahead, how things will work out.

At an art fair recently, I saw frog magnets, each carrying a little sign: “F.R.O.G.—Fully Rely on God.” The psalmist today prays, “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.” When we trust God, we have what we need. We can be comfortable with not knowing everything, knowing God is much more than we are.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place a tiny picture of a frog on your mirror, in your car, beside your bed—wherever you need a reminder to trust in God’s protection.

ADVENT PRAYER: *Shepherding God, deepen my trust in you.*

Prayer Calls Us to Act

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.” MATTHEW 7:21

Toward the end of his life a rabbi was exhausted and prayed that his last days might be made easier and financially secure. So he asked God that he might win the lottery. He prayed constantly about this.

Weeks passed. Months passed. Years passed. Finally, he screamed out in frustration and desperation: “God, give me a break!” To which God answered, “Give me a break, yourself. Buy a ticket!”

Even though I don’t think God’s will is concerned with winning the lottery, this humorous story illustrates the point of today’s gospel—and our lives as prayerful people. Prayer is crucially important, but how we live, what we do, our simple—and extraordinary—actions reveal who we are and exemplify our commitment to God’s dream for us. It’s possible to make prayer a time of words without then going forth to live the words.

DAILY PRACTICE: Today as you pray prayers of intercession (for the needs of others) and prayers of petition (for your needs), think of the actions you can do that flow from those prayers. Then do them.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God of word and action, strengthen me in my prayer. Show me how to live the words of my prayer, acting to bring about your dream for us.*

One-Inch Seeing

The eyes of the blind shall see.

ISAIAH 29:18

Isaiah reminds us of our blindness. What might we be missing?

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott suggests writers imagine what they can see in a one-inch picture frame as a way to make the task of writing less daunting.

If we did this with life, would it help us to slow down, to zero in on what's before us, to see things that—in our usual busyness—we might miss?

At the store, do we really notice the checkout clerks? Do we see them as persons loved by family and friends, rather than just there to serve us? Do we realize the worries, concerns, and perhaps sufferings they are carrying? Do we take time to say something that might brighten their day?

As we walk through our neighborhood, listen to a family member on the phone, read the news, and go to work using a one-inch frame, do we realize that life—and our responses—aren't always about grand gestures? Often, it's the simple things that make a difference.

DAILY PRACTICE: Make (or purchase) a simple one-inch frame. As you gaze at it during your morning prayer, think of whom/what you will see this day through your frame.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who always notices, help me never to miss the feelings and realities behind the actual picture, but to be more aware—as you always are.*

Hatched, Not Broken

The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, healing the brokenhearted, and binding up their wounds. PSALM 147:2–3

In many ways, we could say that Humpty Dumpty has fallen a lot lately: in our own personal experiences, in the happenings throughout our nation, in the challenges around the world, in the various ways that creation is not cared for. Once an egg is broken, all that we can do is make an omelet—unless the egg hasn't just broken but has hatched.

Psalm 147, which we pray today, praises our powerful creator who restored exiled Judah. Because of God, their hearts didn't remain broken and their wounds didn't stay open and hurting. Their reality didn't remain shattered. New life was birthed (hatched) because of God's never-ending presence and care.

The Advent-Christmas season is the celebration of new life that changed our world forever. Because of the birth of God in our midst, we are called, not to make omelets, but to hatch something new.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place a hard-boiled egg on your dinner table for the next few days. Using paint or magic marker, draw on it a symbol of new life. Let it remind you of your call to bring new life out of brokenness.

ADVENT PRAYER: *God who births (hatches) new life, help me be aware of ways to bring new life amid the suffering and struggles within and around me.*