

*The*  
LIGHT OF  
THE WORLD

DAILY MEDITATIONS FOR  
FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

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TWENTY-THIRD  
PUBLICATIONS

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**TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS**

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(860) 437-3012 > (800) 321-0411 > [www.twentythirdpublications.com](http://www.twentythirdpublications.com)

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-212-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2016909031

Printed in the U.S.A.



A Division of Bayard, Inc.



**EACH YEAR ON JUNE 24, AROUND THE TIME OF THE SUMMER SOLSTICE**, the church celebrates the feast of John the Baptist. Just a few days earlier, the longest day of the year marks the earth's midpoint between darkness and light. From John's feast onward, days become shorter and daylight decreases. The world slowly moves to a deeper quiet, toward a winter slumber.

John knew he must decrease so that Christ may increase. He gives us good advice. So too must we accept our need for deeper quiet, for silence, and for a lessening as we await in hope the coming of Christ.

At the beginning of Advent, as we prepare for the coming weeks of deeper darkness, we see the earth slow its rhythm. Skies cloud and darken. The winter solstice, the shortest and darkest day of the year will soon arrive.

Although we know more darkness is coming, we know as well nature promises more light, at least in a few weeks' time. The light must decrease before it again increases in the regular rhythm of the skies and earth. So too with us. As we look toward more light, and as we prepare for the coming of Christ,

we can think of how we might decrease so that the light of Christ may increase both in our lives and in the world.

I think we all know how hard it is to “decrease.” Not long ago, Pope Francis chided us all for wanting to achieve some special recognition, some accounting of our worth, by counting how many internet friends or contacts or hits we have. The false sense of security we gain by these electronic means of validation blocks true light—about ourselves and our relationships. How is it we prefer a screen to people? How is it we think sheer numbers can count our worth?

The Advent project, like any other project of the heart, will advance along the lines we set. If we use electronics to reach out to others, fine. If we use them to hide, and/or to move us along in some fantasy world, we are damaging our very selves and seriously endangering our abilities to see the Christ—in the world, in others, and, most importantly, in ourselves.

New media do not present the only darkness. We know too well the ancient list: anger, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, and sloth. Each of these—called the seven deadly sins or the cardinal sins—is title heading for the smaller, simpler sins of everyday life. No thinking person can be completely and routinely enmeshed in any one of these. No loving person will live without checking against their tendencies daily.

Great literature presents the ways these seven affect the human project. When Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*—tales told by a variety of pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Thomas à Becket’s shrine at Canterbury Cathedral—he included only one good clergyman, the parson. In his tale, the parson lays out the points of reference for the soul returning to a life of grace. He says, to the other pilgrims and implicitly to us, that they and we all need penitence, that they and we, each

and all, need contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and satisfaction for our faults. Such would be the order, and such would be the requirements for every life. Chaucer has use for only one member of the clergy—the parson. He has good advice.

Will Chaucer's advice, conveyed through *The Parson's Tale*, take root in our hearts this Advent? We can drive ourselves blindly in one direction or another, perhaps in the dim light of evening or in the increasing dark of night. The more we ignore the small tic within that points to the distant relative of one or another of the major faults we know about, the more we will move into a darkness, into a realm of self-involvement and deceit.

Then Advent comes along and calls us to remember that because the dark exists, so also we can know the light, and perhaps even know it more brightly when it comes.

These Advent reflections reflect our natural longing for the light. Like John, we can will ourselves to become quieter, slower even, pointing to the Christ who is to come. Like the pilgrims with the parson, we can look within for ways to make our own hearts and minds more transparent, more open, more accepting of the light.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

# Where do we go from here?

**Year A:** ISAIAH 2:1–5; ROMANS 13:11–14; MATTHEW 24:37–44

**Year B:** ISAIAH 63:16B–17, 19B; 64:2–7;

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3–9; MARK 13:33–37

**Year C:** JEREMIAH 33:14–16; 1 THESSALONIANS 3:12—4:2;

LUKE 21:25–28, 34–36



*The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise... JEREMIAH 33:14*

Promises are delicate things. We have all made promises and kept them. We have made promises we have broken. So too we have had promises made to us that others did not keep. Sometimes we can make excuses, for ourselves or for others. We (or they) forgot. We (or they) just could not do it.

Sometimes we know the awful truth. We (or they) lied.

When people grow up in situations where promises are never kept, it is difficult for them to learn to trust; it is hard for them to hear a promise and expect it to be kept.

But Advent is the time for hope in promises, for hope and trust in the promise that Christ is coming, to our homes and lives, to our hearts and minds. Of course, he is already here. But there is the special sense of waiting, quietly, in the dark, for Christ in Christmas to enlighten us.

We quiet ourselves and wait.

But even now, the first day of Advent, the outside world is in a pre-Christmas frenzy. At every turn someone or something is

urging us to get out there and shop, shop, shop. The little trap that advertising sets is real. Remember, we are all in the dark in one way or another. We are all wanderers. We all look for something to brighten the way, to bring us joy.

We long for something real, something to hold on to, but the externals of power and possessions do not satisfy the longing. No matter how much we accumulate, there is something else we need. The car must be bigger, the clothing must be newer, the television, the iPad, the cruise—whatever bauble or trinket catches our eye—all these beckon as answers to the longing.

It's not going to work. As God's creations, we can only find security in God's care. As Christians, we must constantly look for the Christ—the Christ who comes to us every single day in new and sometimes startling ways. We can see, if we look gently enough, Christ in all things. Yet even when we see Christ all around us it is too easy to withdraw into our own ways of being dark, of being empty in the wrong ways, of being alone in narcissistic solitude. From these, from emptiness without hope, from solitude that engages us alone, the coming light calls us to escape.

There are two parts to the exercise. First, we must believe that there will be light. Next, we must open our eyes to see it.

Too many times we waste time wandering around in the dark. Too many times we close our eyes to what is coming. We need to believe God's promise that the light will come.

**A GRACE FOR TODAY**

*Lord, give me the grace to open my eyes to belief.*

# A time to believe

ISAIAH 2:1–5 OR ISAIAH 4:2–6; MATTHEW 8:5–11



*“Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof.”*

MATTHEW 8:8

Advent is a time when we need to hope, certainly in God. I think first, however, we need to take stock in and really believe in ourselves.

Yes, like the centurion in today’s gospel, we are not worthy to have the Lord come “under our roof.” But in a very real and honest way we are actually very worthy to have the Lord come to us. In fact, one of the greatest challenges of Christian life is to allow ourselves to believe we are worthy of God’s love, to believe we are worthy of the fact that Christ came into our world for us—really and personally—and that God loves us just the way we are.

So when we find ourselves not believing in that fact, we begin to get down on ourselves. Soon the season turns sour. Nothing is quite right. This one or that one did not sit next to me at lunch. She or he did not walk with me that day. I cannot get an appointment, a date, a time to get together with someone I truly want to see. So the spindle turns and pretty soon we are caught in a web of our own creating. We do not believe, first of all, in ourselves, and very soon we forget that we are God’s precious creations and worthy of love—of others and of God. That is a huge realization, and one we need to hang on to.

Even if the deep and personal knowledge that we are God’s

precious creations becomes our own at some time of deep prayer or consolation, it can slip away in an instant when we feel abandoned somehow by someone else, especially by a person we love.

Not long ago, Macy's took for its Christmas theme the word "Believe." In huge white script, "Believe" wrapped itself around boxes and bags, even around parts of the store.

When you think of it, it's not a bad recommendation. We need to believe. We need to believe in God's promise, and we need to believe in ourselves. If we believe in ourselves, when we say "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof," we are both stating a fact and asserting our dignity, not asserting that we are worthless. We are in no way equal to God, but as God's beautiful creations we are worthy of receiving him.

That can be a difficult lesson for just about anyone. Somewhere in our minds a difficult memory took up permanent residence years ago. Now, every so often it taunts us with evil's equivalent of the schoolyard chant: "You're ugly and your mother dresses you funny." There is no getting away from it. The memory is ours. It is our own, deep, personal history. As it worms its way into our minds, we feel less and less worthy. The memory is often not that easy to dismiss. But dismiss it we must, sometimes with the graced assistance of a spiritual director or professional counselor, or both. We cannot allow anything to turn us away from God's love for us as his perfect creations, deserving of love in every way.

As we wait this hopeful season, we can consider and pray deeply for the understanding that God has made us and loves us and cares for us.

**A GRACE FOR TODAY**

*Lord, give me the grace to believe in your love for me.*

# Peace can enter our hearts

ISAIAH 11:1-10; LUKE 10:21-24



*He shall judge the poor with justice and decide aright  
for the land's afflicted....Then the wolf shall be a guest  
of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.*

ISAIAH 11:4, 6

Today Isaiah speaks beautifully about God's promise of the one to come, the one who will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. The promise is for our world today, not for some ancient desert in our imagination.

I think there is genuine excitement in today's readings. The prophet says the one who is to come will be filled with what we know as the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. Can there be any more hope-filled words?

As God's Spirit rests on Jesus and enters the world through him, we know these promises are real: "the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." Even so, we ask: When? Where?

We live in a world of constant tragedy. Every single day, it seems, there is another mass death: from war, from disease, from individual acts of evil. Our hearts break as we see the pictures and hear the sounds of so many suffering people. Everybody and everything seems to be at war.

As we await Christ's coming this year, I think there are three

levels of war we need to pray about. There is of course the war between nations, among peoples who seek each other's property and power. There are as well the wars between individuals, the private disagreements that fester and spill over to angry exchanges, sometimes even to fistfights and hair-pulling, both real and metaphorical. Then there is the war within our own hearts. It is a very real thing to have opposing ideas collide in our minds.

What to do?

I think the natural reaction to national wars far away is to shake our heads and thank God it is not here, not in my country. But in a very real way, war is in everyone's country. If the bombs and rockets don't fall and explode in our own downtown, they are surely falling in someone else's. And they were paid for by somebody's taxes. So the exploding metal thousands of miles away obliterates money—tax money—that might have fed the hungry child or helped to settle a refugee. The dust and dirt a bomb throws in the air will hurt someone, eventually even us as it clogs the lungs and stunts the growth of someone who might have grown to cure a dread disease.

So too with interpersonal disagreements that spill anger into the air. The toxic waste they leave infiltrates whole communities. People can no longer live together, work together, eat together, even pray together.

When we live in these environs it is all too easy for evil to seep into our minds and disturb our peace. We choose one side or the other. We agree with one or the other in warfare large and small. We defend one or the other without seeking real peace or justice. Yet our faith combines with Scripture here to teach on many levels at once.

Maybe our best response is to begin by trying to work peace

between some warring factions in our own hearts, so as to make us more peaceful inhabitants of the planet.

**A GRACE FOR TODAY**

*Lord, give me the grace to seek peace in myself.*

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# Enough for everyone

ISAIAH 25:6–10A; MATTHEW 15:29–37



*Jesus summoned his disciples and said, “My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry.”...They all ate and were satisfied.*

MATTHEW 15:32, 37

The territory around the Sea of Galilee can be very unforgiving. The hills are quite steep in many places, the vegetation is rough scrub, the sun sears the skin in the hot seasons, and rain deadens the mind when winter winds blow through the land. In this gospel, the crowds have come to listen to the great preacher, the one they heard about, perhaps in the village, perhaps on the lakeshore. He has a message they all hunger for.

But we need to pay attention to where they are in time and space. The crowds before Jesus are out in the open, exposed to the elements on a hillside in Palestine. They did not come by bicycle or car. They came on foot. Some may have walked for a day—as much as twenty or twenty-five miles. They are surely tired, and quite probably hungry.

So Jesus’s first concern is for their physical security. They have to eat.

Many years ago I taught an 8:00 A.M. class. One semester, that class was popular with the university’s basketball team. These were the days before students seemed to have water bot-

tles or coffee cups permanently affixed to their hands. I noticed that this crowd—mostly boys—was particularly inattentive. So I asked: Have you eaten breakfast? The perhaps predictable answer came from most of them: “Uh, no.”

It was pretty obvious that not much would be going on in their heads if they had not eaten, but unlike Jesus I could not then and there provide a meal. I could only provide a requirement: eat breakfast before class.

You know, it worked.

My short tale echoes the truth of the gospel passage: we cannot hear God’s word if we are in physical distress.

But today’s reading is about so much more. Christ’s food here is for both the body and the soul. As in the passage, we receive all we need when we need it, and we really should not fear it will not come again. God’s bounty is not like an apple pie that, once eaten, is no more. There is always more to hear from God; there is always more to receive from Christ.

We often have a hard time believing this, especially in the pre-Christmas frenzy when there seems to be more to do and less time to do it in, and as days grow shorter and the light grows dim. I think the analogy is real: we know what it means to hear Christ’s word, to feel God’s touch. But when we are really or metaphorically hungry, we have trouble receiving that word and that touch.

The answer to the problem given by St. Ignatius, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), is to store up consolations in the face of desolation. That sounds good—like a little chipmunk we pack away good memories like nuts hidden in a tree stump—but it is not the easiest thing in the world. While we can remember the summer-like warmth of graced moments, we are not always sure they will come around again when life gets

chilly. In fact, sometimes we feel so terribly empty, we wonder if we ever knew God.

Advent is a time to throw off all that and get rid of the doubts, the fears, and the conviction that never again will we feel the sweetness of God's embrace.

Christ will not allow us to go hungry.

**A GRACE FOR TODAY**

*Lord, give me the grace to not be frightened about my needs.*